

CREATING THE SELF:
THE INTERSUBJECTIVE NATURE OF EXPERIENCE, SELF-DEVELOPMENT, AND THE PHENOMENON
OF PLAY

by

Jessica A. Blackwell, Bachelor of Arts,
University of Guelph, 2013

A thesis,
presented to Ryerson University

in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

in the Program of
Philosophy

Toronto, Ontario, Canada, 2017

©Jessica A. Blackwell 2017

AUTHOR'S DECLARATION FOR ELECTRONIC SUBMISSION OF A THESIS

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

I authorize Ryerson University to lend this thesis to other institutions or individuals for the purpose of scholarly research.

I further authorize Ryerson University to reproduce this thesis by photocopying or by other means, in total or in part, at the request of other institutions or individuals for the purpose of scholarly research. I understand that my thesis may be made electronically available to the public.

Creating the Self: The Intersubjective Nature of Human Experience, Self-Development, and the Phenomenon of Play.
Jessica A. Blackwell.
Master of Arts, 2017.
Department of Philosophy.
Ryerson University.

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this project is to present a phenomenological account of the role of play in early self-development. Using the writings of Merleau-Ponty, Sartre, Winnicott, Laing, Beauvoir, and a selection of modern psychologists, this project argues that play is an essential component of childhood self-development. Starting with the claim that all human experience is inherently intersubjective, this project argues that other people play a crucial role in shaping our sense of self and who we become. From the moment we are born, other people play a critical and constant role in shaping our perception of who we are and who we can become. It is argued that play, like linguistic communication, is itself a necessarily intersubjective phenomenon, and that authentic acts of play are essentially a matter of the child learning about the nature of reality and other people, and of striving to make sense of these things while simultaneously working on creating the self.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my thesis supervisor, Dr. Kym Maclaren, for the overwhelming support and guidance that she has given me throughout the thesis-writing process. It is only because of her unfailing patience, compassion, and mentorship that I have been able to complete this project. I have learned so much from her about what it means to study philosophy well, to write excellently, to be a good teacher, and so much more. I would also like to thank my friend and mentor, Dr. John Russon, for the overwhelming support and guidance that he has given me over the past five years, and for the time and wisdom that he has contributed to helping me complete this project. Additionally, I would like to thank the members of my thesis defense committee, Dr. David Ciavatta and Dr. John Caruana; the Ryerson Philosophy MA program administrator, Malu Maia; and the MA program directors, David Hunter and Glen Parsons, who, in a more administrative capacity, assisted me during the completion of this project.

Finally, I would like to thank Nick Workman, my loving friend and partner, who spent many days helping me through the writing process and many long nights losing sleep with me; my father-figure and first mentor, Joseph Malone, who taught me what love is and who, with his unyielding dedication and support, always made me feel like I could accomplish anything I put my mind to; my friend, colleague, and play-mate, Rebecca Kovacs; my friend, Cameron Bond; my loving mother, Lisa Malone; my dear friend and neighbour, Curtis MacIntyre; my darling grandmother, Mary Malone; my sister-in-law, Miha Pal, who was kind enough to share with me some of her own childhood experiences of play; and all of the other individuals who, each in their own way, offered me encouragement and support during the completion of this project.

Thank you. I will not forget the kindness and support that each of you has shown me during the completion of this project.

To Joseph Malone,
my father, my friend, my guardian angel—
my one and only Poppa.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION.....	1
1. CHAPTER ONE	
1.1 Part One: The Intersubjective Nature of Human Experience and Identity.....	4
1.1.1 Section I: Intersubjectivity and the Experience of Others.....	4
The shared world and the recognition of bodily intentionality.....	4
Co-existence and the perceived absence of individual perspectives.....	9
The gradual realization of the existence of differing perspectives.....	11
The gaze of the other and the need for contact.....	14
Re-establishing the shared world through relations with the other.....	17
Confirmation, ontological security, and the self.....	19
Conclusion.....	33
1.1.2 Section II: Expression and Communication.....	36
1.2 Part Two: The Intersubjective Nature of Human Development.....	46
1.2.1 Section II: The Role of Others in Self-Development from Infancy.....	46
The self as indistinct from the mother (“illusion”).....	47
The self as separating from the mother (“disillusionment”).....	48
The self as an individual unit.....	60
The self as realizing the true nature of things.....	64
The self in adolescence.....	65
1.2.2 Conclusion.....	69
2. CHAPTER TWO	
2.1 Part One: What Play is and the Role of Play in Self-development.....	72
2.1.1 Section I: The Common-sense or Cliché Account of Play.....	72
2.1. 2 Section II: Winnicott’s Account of Play.....	77
Fantasy v. play.....	77
Unification of the self and world through play.....	81
Object-use, creativity, and freedom in play.....	85
Play as involving formlessness.....	92
Play, socialization, and the subjectivity of others.....	96
Play and the healthy expression of aggression.....	100
Play and the mastering of anxiety.....	103
2.1. 3 Conclusion.....	107
2.2 Part Two: Play as an Inherently Intersubjective Phenomenon.....	109
2.3 Part Three: Risk, Failure, and Disconfirmation in Play.....	122
CONCLUSION.....	131
APPENDIX.....	137
REFERENCES.....	145

INTRODUCTION

This project intends to address the questions of what play essentially is, and how it relates to the individual's self-development. In the course of doing this, five main theses will be argued for: (1) that all human experience, including experience of the self, is inherently intersubjective; (2) that, as a result of our intersubjective nature, individual self-development is itself an intersubjective project; (3) that play is a critical and necessary part of early self-development; (4) that play is itself inherently intersubjective; and, finally, (5) that how we play really matters and can have a lasting impact on our sense of self, thus meaning that negative play experiences can be traumatic and have negative consequences on the individual's self-development.

Chapter One lays the foundation for the ensuing discussion of self-development by explaining what kind of "position" it is that we are born into. It is argued that we are, from birth, caught up in relations with others and that all aspects of our experience reveal to us the extent of our intersubjective nature. The first portion of Chapter One examines what impact our intersubjectivity has on our experience of the world, self, and others. Relying primarily on the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty with supporting information from the work of Jean-Paul Sartre, it will be argued that all human experience is intersubjective in nature and that we cannot possibly escape this milieu of intersubjectivity that we are born into, and that our experience of other people and our interactions with them create a tension in our existence that calls out to us to resolve it. Other people exist for us as unique, individual agencies with the same powers of freedom, interpretation, and creation and destruction that we have, and each individual possesses her own perspective on the world and on who we are. We thus experience a sense of tension between our own perspective on the world and who we are (our "being-for-self") and the other's perspective on these things (our "being-for-others"), and, because of this tension, a need to find a means of accessing the other's perspective. In accordance with Merleau-Ponty's contentions, it will be argued that one of the primary ways that we have of accessing the perspective of the other is the power of *communication*, and, more specifically, the communicatory power of *speech*.

The second half of Chapter One will further examine what kind of thing the human self is, emphasizing that the human self is, much like our overall experience of the world, something multifaceted and complex, ambiguous and indeterminate, dualistic (i.e. comprised of an "inner"

and an “outer,” and a mixture of both our “being-for-self” and “being-for-others”), dynamic and fluid, free and transcendent, and, in an important way, the result of the ways in which we exercise our freedom and make use of our creative capacity.

The discussion will then move on to provide an account of the process of human self-development as described by Merleau-Ponty, Salvador Minuchin, D. W. Winnicott, Freud, and Simone de Beauvoir. This discussion of self-development will focus on the intersubjective nature of the developmental process. A description of the process of early self-development (infancy through puberty and adolescence) will be given, stressing the role that other people play in helping the child create a sense of self. The role of the family in shaping the child’s sense of self will be stressed as a particularly important component of early self-development. Thus, this chapter will emphasize the ways in which others are, from the very beginning of our lives, largely responsible for shaping who we become. It will be concluded that, while the self is something that is *created*, it is both created by other people and by the individual. In fact, it might be more accurate to say that we are *first created by other people* (beginning in infancy), and that our own active efforts at *self-creation* are a secondary event beginning in childhood.

Chapter Two intends to demonstrate the profound role that play has in the child’s early self-development. This chapter will begin by offering a definition of the term “play” as it is being used in this paper, which will be contrasted with a “common-sense” or “cliché” account of what play is. Play has traditionally been viewed as an unnecessary activity that is essentially a matter of leisure or of escaping from reality. In contrast to this view, this paper will take up Winnicott’s view of play as essentially being a matter of the child learning how to cope with and make sense of reality, the existence of other people, and his own sense of self; play is fundamentally a matter of the child developing skills and tools that come together to produce a functional, healthy self. Play is a space in which children can practice at being people, learn about themselves and others, and create and act on new meanings and possibilities. This paper supports Winnicott’s definition of what play is, and will argue that Winnicott’s account of play illustrates clearly how and why it is such a critical part of the child’s healthy development.

The second portion of Chapter Two argues for the claim that play is, like the rest of human experience, intersubjective. It will be argued that the child’s capacity for play is largely (if not primarily) dependent on his relations with others. Similarly, how, where, and what the child can play are largely dependent on others, and, even when alone, how the child plays will

always be influenced by his relationships (past and present) with others. It will also be argued that the intersubjective nature of play is revealed in the recognition of play as a complex form of communication that is similar to Merleau-Ponty's notion of first-order speech.

Of course, not all play is beneficial to positive self-development or a healthy sense of self. Just as most other aspects of our lives can go awry, so too can play. The final part of Chapter Two will consider the role that other people have in the play of children and adolescents with a focus on the ways in which play can "fail" or "go wrong." This is to say that a distinction will be drawn between "successful" or "healthy" play and "failed" or "unhealthy" play.

Unfortunately, because play is an intimate experience in which we make ourselves vulnerable to others, play holds the potential to become a *traumatic* experience if used improperly by others or by the individual herself. Laing's notion of *disconfirmation* will be shown to be applicable to certain instances of failed play, and will be used to help illuminate the importance of childhood play-experiences. This final portion of the paper will ultimately conclude that our play-experiences really matter—not just in the moment or for the duration of the play activity; just as positive play-experiences can contribute to the child's healthy self-development, so too can negative play-experiences offset the course of individual development or leave a lasting mark.

CHAPTER ONE

This chapter intends to lay the foundation for our discussion of human identity, self-development, and the phenomenon of play. The goal of this chapter will be to demonstrate the intersubjective nature of all human experience and, more specifically, how our inherent intersubjectivity impacts our self-development. This chapter has been broken down into two parts. Part One intends to describe the situation that we find ourselves born into, explaining how we are, from birth, inextricably bound up with and reliant on other people, and what this means for our experience of the world and of the human self. Part One will walk through two important subjects: (1) intersubjectivity and the experience of others, and (2) communication. The second part of this chapter builds off the aforementioned material, offering an account of the role that other people play in early self-development (i.e. from infancy through adolescence), with an emphasis on the role of the family.

1.1 Part One: The Human Body and The Human World—The Intersubjective Nature of Human Experience and Identity

1.1.1 Section One: Intersubjectivity and the Experience of Others

The shared world and the recognition of bodily intentionality

The experience of others is immediate, inherent to our being, and inescapable. We are each born into a body—a body that is itself *conscious* and *perceptual* and that is *perceived* by other conscious bodies. Thus, from the moment that we are born—from our first moments of consciousness, we are engaged in perception; we are conscious, perceptual beings that cannot help but experience the world around us. What it means to be conscious beings is precisely that we are always experiencing. Rather than saying that all experience derives from consciousness, we can instead say that *consciousness is experience*. So long as we are conscious we are conscious of something, which is akin to saying that we are always experiencing and that all experience is experience of something. Thus, we have established that we are embodied beings

and that what it means to be embodied is to be a perceptual, conscious being that is always bound up in perception.

Because of this, because of our very nature and our embodiment, Merleau-Ponty (2012) strives to make it clear that, in contrast to Descartes and many other thinkers, there is no “problem of others.” For him, such a problem does not even exist, and the only way in which we can arrive at such an extreme notion as questioning the subjectivity of other people is through intellectual abstraction. Merleau-Ponty argues that, through an examination of our actual experience of other people, it is made clear that we experience other people *as people*. We intuitively and naturally interact with other people as though they are other people, and there is never any actual *need* to try to establish the consciousness of others by means of comparison, intellectualism, or through abstract thought experiments. Solipsism is not our natural state of being or relating to other people, and is something that we can only fathom by removing ourselves from our first-hand experience of other people and retreating into abstract intellectual thought (Merleau-Ponty, 2012).

This intimate and inescapable relationship with other people is what our experience reveals to us and it is for this reason that Merleau-Ponty urges that we must not think of human consciousness as a pure, “constituting consciousness” and pure “being-for-itself” (p. 367). Rather, if we are to account for the nature of our experience, our perception and experience of others, and the ways in which the mere presence of other people impacts and influences us, we must instead understand human consciousness as a perceptual, behavioural consciousness, “as the subject of a behaviour, as being in the world or existence.” (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, p. 367) This is because this is the only understanding of human consciousness that will allow “another person [to] appear in control of his phenomenal body and receive a sort of ‘place.’” (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, p.367)

To support his claim, Merleau-Ponty notes that, “Insofar as I have sensory functions... I already communicate with others” (p. 369). This is because, as Merleau-Ponty says, we recognize the other’s body as “the bearer of behaviour” (p. 364). What this means is that every individual, by virtue of being a body that is itself a bearer of behaviour, is capable of recognizing other bodies as bearers of behaviours. As Russon (2003) says, “Our bodies are our determinateness, the specificity of our existence. The body is the point where each of us is

something specific. To be a body is to be a specific identity that is open to involvement with others” (p. 21).

Merleau-Ponty explains that we inhabit a world in which we perceive “other behaviours” as oriented towards the world, interacting with the world, handling our familiar objects and giving new meaning to our world (p.370). He explains:

A vortex forms around the perceived body into which my world is drawn and, so to speak, sucked in: to this extent, my world is no longer merely mine, it is no longer present only to me, it is present to X, to this other behavior that begins to take shape in it. The other body is already no longer a simple fragment of the world. A certain handling of things—which were until now mine alone—is taking place over there. Someone is using my familiar objects. But who? (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, pp. 369-370)

We perceive other people as perceiving and dealing with the world, as being conscious, as being in possession of a conscious, living body. This is to say that we perceive a certain *intentionality* in the behaviour of others that we experience directly and that makes the other appear to us as alive as a conscious subjectivity—as a *person* that is distinct from the various objects that comprise shared reality.

Merleau-Ponty goes on to explain that we know the other person as a subject because they have the same living body that demonstrates the same constituting powers as our own body. This perception and recognition of the other as another person is, again, accomplished *through the body*—through a bodily recognition—before it is ever recognized through intellectual activity. Merleau-Ponty says:

Now, it is precisely my body that perceives the other’s body and finds there something of a miraculous extension of its own intentions, a familiar way of handling the word. Henceforth, just as the parts of my body together form a system, the other’s body and my own are a single whole, two sides of a single phenomenon, and the anonymous existence, of which my body is continuously the trace, henceforth inhabits these two bodies simultaneously. (p. 370)

Thus, Merleau-Ponty claims that the perception of others as the bearers of a bodily intentionality that is immediately perceived and taken up by our own, living bodies is something that is built into our experience.

Because the other’s body is experienced *as* behaviour and intentionality, we do not initially experience the other as a mere mechanistic object. Rather, we first notice the other’s

gaze, their intentionality, or their orientation towards something. This is to say that we directly perceive other people perceiving, we do not *infer* it. The behaviour of others—their intentionality and affect—is not private (i.e. we are not private subjectivities). Rather, the behaviour of others is on display and evident to us. Even with limited information (i.e. surrounding why a person is engaging in a particular behaviour or what, exactly, that behaviour means to that person), we still directly and immediately perceive the behaviours of others as behaviours performed by a subject, as obvious or apparent and somewhat accessible, and as meaningful. Thus, even the infant is first oriented not towards their caregiver’s eyeballs or the colour of their eyes, but towards the intentionality conveyed in the gaze or the voice of the caregiver. It is for this reason that the infant and the child, despite lacking the same, refined linguistic and cognitive capacities as the adult, can recognize other people *as people*. Infants and children are capable of recognizing another human being as a body that they can interact with—a body that can receive their behaviour and perform its own behaviours in turn.

Thus, while each person is still a unique, individual subjectivity with a particular personal history, the fact that we experience bodily intentionality reveals to us that we are *not*, however, *private* subjectivities. Because our perception of others begins with a direct experience of their intentionality, others’ minds are not entirely private—they are experienced as “out there” in the world and (to varying degrees) accessible. It is (mostly) not the case that the other and his perspective are a complete mystery to us; we have access to the other’s mind through his body language, behaviours, actions, decisions, and commitments. As long as the other is animated, he is already communicating something to us; the meaning is already there, and our task is to recognize it and make sense of it. Ultimately, then, the other’s consciousness is not private *in principle*, but some things are private *in practice*.

That being said, there remain aspects of a person’s context or personal history that are not available or apparent to us, and we do not always know how our interactions will be taken up and reintegrated into the other’s narrative once we have parted company. Also, as Ryle (1949) notes, we cannot fully understand or directly access certain *qualia* that others may perceive, such as sensations of pain or pleasure, or others’ dream content (p. 61).

Another way in which the existence of others is evident to us is in the fact that none of us is the sole inhabitant of this world. We exist within a shared world—a world that is inhabited by other embodied, conscious subjects. Thus, the world that we are born into and that is the stage

for all our experience is not an empty world that is just for us. Rather, we are born into a world that immediately announces to us the presence of others—other conscious bodies. We inhabit a shared world. Everything about our existence and our daily lives announces this to us. Not only are we faced with the presence of particular others and bound to them from birth, we are also born into a social and cultural atmosphere that serves as a constant sign of our co-habitation with others. We are born into a society and what a society is, according to Merleau-Ponty, is a “coexistence with an indefinite number of consciousnesses” (p. 364). What this means in light of our embodiment is that we are always, in some way and to some extent, perceiving other people.

Our experiences of the particular society and culture that we are born into serve as an example of the way in which our experience of others is factual, imminent, and unescapable. The cultural milieu to which we belong is the collection and amalgamation of the behaviours of others—past and present—that have become sedimented over time (p.363). In this sense, the world we are born into is already determined to some extent. The familiar objects, tools, and practices that fill our lives carry with them a trace of their human origin and their human function (p. 363). They have defined purposes, meanings, and origins that we had no part in establishing, and we recognize, even if only implicitly, that their current existence is owed to other people. Thus, it is the case that, even without the physical presence of other people, I am made aware of or reminded of their existence over and over again. As Merleau-Ponty says, “In a cultural object, I experience the near presence of others under a veil of anonymity” (p. 363).

What it means to belong to a society is to belong to a collection of people—people with the same consciousness, freedom, and other powers that we ourselves have—living together in a particular space and time. As the old saying “no man is an island” attempts to summarize, it is a fact of our existence and of our experience that we are always involved with other people, whether indirectly or directly. As members of a society, we are constantly reliant upon other people for our needs and wants, we stumble into interaction or communication with them, and, indeed, we also desire and seek out the company of others. We are constantly exposed to other people from birth and, through our interactions with them, our own opinions, beliefs, and perspectives are influenced. Merleau-Ponty says:

But we have learned in individual perception not to conceive of our unique perspectives as independent of each other; we know that they slip into each other and are gathered together in the thing. Similarly, we must learn to find the communication of consciousnesses in a single world.

In fact, the other person is not enclosed in my perspective on the world because this perspective itself has no definite limits, because it spontaneously slips into the other's perspective, and because they are gathered together in a single world in which we all participate as anonymous subjects of perception. (p. 369)

In this passage, we find an explanation for the way in which our perspectives come together in our experience and perception of particular objects and occurrences.

Similarly, our consciousnesses come together and unite in the form of culture. The behaviours of the many past others, present others, and our own behaviours “descend into nature and are deposited there in the form of a cultural world.” (p. 363) No single person defines a culture, lives a culture, or changes a culture. Culture, like society, is a collective phenomenon to which we all contribute and from which we all partake.

Co-existence and the lack of experience of individual perspectives.

Thus, we initially find ourselves inhabiting a *shared world* and living out our lives among countless other people. However, the shared world that we initially find ourselves in is one that is experienced as *absolute* and *universal*. Our earliest experiences of the world reveal to us a lack of the recognition of different perspectives; we do not initially understand that we each have our own, unique perspective on the world that may be different from or at odds with the individual perspectives of others.

Merleau-Ponty claims that this lack of understanding of the unique perspectives that others hold is why young children do not experience the existence of other people as problematic or challenging in the same way that adults do (p. 371). He says:

The child lives in a world that he believes is immediately accessible to everyone around him. He is unaware of himself and, for that matter, of others as private subjectivities. He does not suspect that all of us, including himself, are limited to a certain point of view upon the world. (p. 371)

As children, we find ourselves in a world that appears to us as evident and absolute; we assume that the world that we perceive and live through is the same world that others share, and that others' perceptions of that world fall in line with our own. At this stage, there is not even a question of different perspectives; we share the world with others and take for granted that we all experience things the same way. Thus, to the child it seems obvious that the shows he likes are

likeable, that the things he has been taught to believe are actually and universally so, and that, in general, the ways in which he sees things is the way that they actually are. What the child sees, presumably everyone sees.

Merleau-Ponty goes on to explain how certain thinkers, such as Piaget, see the development of the child as leading to a development of the “cogito” and an understanding of rationalism, as well the recognition of the self as a unique consciousness with a particular and limited view upon the world. For Piaget, this occurs at around age twelve. At this age, the child would realize that overcoming this subjectivity and particular perspective would necessitate attempting to construct objective truths about the world (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, p. 371). Merleau-Ponty, however, does not agree that this eradication of the initial view of the child actually occurs, or at least not as completely and suddenly as Piaget suggests. Merleau-Ponty believes that our recognition of the existence of differing perspectives on the world occurs much more gradually as we progress through the later stages of childhood. This gradual realization that others see the world differently comes about in a multitude of ways, such as through the ways in which others assert their own perspectives on us—through the ways in which others forbid us to follow our own desires or goals, or tell us things that do not make sense to us or that we disagree with. Thus, we experience *degrees* of recognition of the full meaning of otherness throughout childhood development, and this recognition often becomes most clear and prominent during adolescence.

Another point of concern that Merleau-Ponty expresses regarding Piaget’s assumptions is that he does not believe that we ever fully escape or shed our childhood experience of inhabiting a shared world and co-existing peacefully. Merleau-Ponty says, “Piaget brings the child of age to reason as if the adult’s thoughts were self-sufficient and would remove all contradictions. But in fact, children must in some sense be correct against adults and against Piaget...” (pp. 371-372).

Merleau-Ponty goes on to say that, for us to have the experience of other people that we do as adults, we must recognize that what “acquisition of the cogito” actually brings about is:

[T]he struggle between consciousnesses in which, as Hegel says, each one seeks the death of the other. For this battle even to begin, for each consciousness to even suspect the external presences that it negates, they must have a common ground and they must remember their peaceful coexistence in childhood. (p. 372)

In other words, our experience of others during childhood reveals a world which we cohabitate with other consciousnesses without experiencing the threat that they pose to our own unique views and perceptions. This experience is not, however, fully destroyed by the realization of other perspectives and the gaining of more finely-tuned rational faculties. Both Sartre's and Hegel's discussions of the struggle between consciousnesses is a discussion of an adult perspective that presupposes the child's perception of a shared world and the absence of perspectives—peaceful coexistence. In other words, Merleau-Ponty is saying that the full-blown recognition of subjectivity and the differences of perspective that we possess in adolescence and adulthood is two-sided: (1) on the one hand, we maintain the sense of childhood coexistence, and this is what allows us to hold onto the idea and experience of cohabiting within a shared reality. (2) On the other hand, we also develop and then hold onto the recognition of a difference in perspective between conscious subjects. It is because we mature to be in possession of both these realities that, when we are looking at a teacup and so is some other, we are able to recognize that we are actually looking at *the same* teacup, but that their perspective on the teacup (like ours) is unique. Thus, because we never fully shake off our experience or understanding of the world as a place of peaceful coexistence, recognizing and keeping conscious the uniqueness of others' perspectives is a life-long project; we sometimes lose sight of the fact that not everyone experiences the teacup in the same way that we do, or that the teacup's meaning will vary from person-to-person; we can fall back into a way of thinking about the world in which our own perspective is *the* (absolute, universal) perspective.

The gradual realization of the existence of differing perspectives on the world.

Once we have come to the realization that other people have their own, differing perspectives on the world, Merleau-Ponty explains that our perception and experience of the other reveal to us a challenge against our own being, and that this necessarily complicates our experience.

The reason why the existence and presence of other people can be so distressing to us is because, when alone or when disconnected from the social sphere, we experience the world as *self-evident* and (once we have come to realize that our perspective on the world differs from that of the other) as existing *for us*. In the absence of the other, the world typically appears to us as

something that *we* make sense of—that takes on the form that our unique perspective would cause it to take, and that we experience as being *oriented towards us*. In the absence of the other, we can again take the world and all its meaning for granted.

When another person enters the picture, however, the world is suddenly no longer for us or oriented towards us, but is, rather, *oriented towards and for the other* as well. In light of our newfound knowledge of the other's unique perspective, the meanings that we have assigned to things are called into question. What this means is that the other both *challenges* our perspective on the world and *takes away* a part of the world—he pulls something of the world into himself and his own perspective, and it becomes our goal to find a way to retrieve what is taken from us. Next, we are led to ask ourselves: what is it about the experience of the other as a subject and ourselves as an object for the other that is so distressing? First, as we have noted, the experience of the other as a subject calls into question our view on the world and shatters the relatively peaceful existence that we have when in a state of being-for-self. I see the world in a certain way and I have certain beliefs and opinions about it. When I am alone, my perspective is *the* perspective—the *only* perspective or, at the very least, *the only perspective that matters*. When another person enters the situation, however, a *second* interpretation of the world appears and my beliefs and opinions are challenged.

The first example that Sartre (1984) provides to illuminate our experience of other people and the impact that they have on us is the discussion of the man in the park (pp. 341-345).

Example #1: The Park-Goer

In the first example, Sartre describes the experience of a man (who we shall call the “park-goer”) sitting by himself in a park. At first, he is alone and he is taking in the scenery of the park. In this moment, the world encompassed by his perception is defined by his own perspective. Then, suddenly, another man (“the other”) enters his field of vision; the other enters the park and begins to walk on a lawn in the near distance. Sartre notes that the other is immediately apprehended by the park-goer as both an object and a man (p. 341).

What this means, says Sartre (1984), is that the park-goer recognizes the other as the *center of a universe*—as a being who does not stand in additive relation to the things around him but who sets the terms for their measurement (i.e. the distance of things in the other's world is measured from his own coordinates and not by means of objective coordinates, nor is it

measured from the park-goer's own coordinates). Thus, says Sartre, the park-goer experiences the spatiality and orientation of the other as *pulling in* the objects that were previously oriented towards the park-goer—he is pulling the world *away from the park-goer* (p. 342).

Furthermore, while the situation is given to the park-goer as a whole, it also entirely escapes him. Sartre says, “To the extent that the man-as-object is the fundamental term of this relation, to the extent that the relation reaches toward him, it escapes me. I cannot put myself at the center of it” (p. 342). In this way, the world is no longer for the park-goer and his universe begins to disintegrate in the face of the presence of the other. In instances like these, the world turns its face away from me and towards the other, impeding my ability to understand it as I did before (Sartre, 1984, p. 343).

Finally, Sartre notes that what it truly means to have the experience of “*seeing-the-Other*” is to have the experience (or to experience the potential of having the experience) of “*Being-seen-by-the-Other*” (p. 345).

Thus, in cases where we can observe the other observing without being observed ourselves, as we have seen from this example of the park-goer, we experience the other person as an object that nonetheless possesses a human perspective and the human powers of perception. What is so troubling about the park-goer's experience of the other as an “internal hemorrhage” is that, when the other shows up in our world and turns our universe towards himself, we experience ourselves as *unable* to access the other's perspective (p. 345). Or, rather, we could say that we experience the *risk* of being unable to access the other's perspective. Insofar as he refuses to engage with us, only the other person truly knows and understands his perspective. We may guess at what he is thinking as he examines the freshly-watered grass on the lawn, or hesitates before sitting on the park bench, but we do not actually *know* his thoughts and we cannot see things from his perspective. We may be able to learn something of his perspective on the world through observing his behaviour, but it is unlikely that we will capture the full picture in this way. The closest that we come to accessing the other's perspective on the world is through direct interaction and the establishing of an open dialogue, but, even then, we face the risk of the other refusing to share with us the things that want to know; the other can always reject our attempts to engage him in meaningful interaction—he can walk away from us and remove himself from the situation, avoid answering our inquiries directly, remain entirely silent, or lie to us.

In this way, we experience the world as exceeding our grasp on it. The world is, in light of how many people inhabit it together, full of meaning that escapes us and our own, limited perspectives. It is only when we believe that we are truly alone that the world seems polarized towards us, but it will always slip in and out of our grasp, and we must live with the understanding that our perspective is never the only perspective. What we have seen through this example, then, is the way in which the world escapes us when we perceive the other as a conscious object, and the way in which this recognition of the other's individual subjectivity (his very otherness) calls out to us to find a way to bridge the gap between our own perspective and the other's. The other has his own, unique hold on reality, and, because we share a single, foundational reality, we desire to know how the other perceives this shared world and what it means to him.

The gaze of the other and the need for contact.

The second primary challenge that we experience in the face of the other's perspective is the fact that the other's perspective encompasses not only the world that we inhabit, but also our own self. Recognition of the other as a full subject and recognition of the validity of his gaze entails recognition of the self as an *object for the other* (Sartre, 1984, pp. 340-382).

When the other turns his attention towards us, we are subjected to the other's gaze—the gaze of another person—and are inspected by him, in much the same way that we ourselves examine material objects, like teacups and paintings. This is an experience that is unique to our intersubjective engagements, as we can never be an object for ourselves (though we can feel ourselves become one for the other). No matter how we may try, we will always appear to ourselves as subjects. This negation of our subjectivity, then, is a power that is unique to the other—something that only the other can do to us. It is also the case that we can never be an object for an object. Only other subjectivities can turn us into objects, thus proving to us that the other person who causes us to experience ourselves as an object must himself be a subject. Once again, we are faced with the realization that the experience of the other as a person and as a subject is factual and inherent to our experience.

The recognition of the self as an object for the other is the recognition of the self as an object that is *not for me*. The most personal aspect of myself—*who I am*—is thus not only called

into question, but *taken away* from me. Within the other's gaze we have a sense of ourselves as doing something or being something for the other without knowing exactly what we are to that person. What this means is that the experience of my objectivity escaping me is also the experience of *who* and *what I am* escaping me. While being seen as an object by the other person is still being seen as some kind of consciousness or freedom, the other also gives to me an identity of which I am not in control. This is experience of other people as taking away from or challenging our own perspective on reality is experienced by us as a challenge to the very status of our being.

On the topic of being, Merleau-Ponty notes that, typically, we accept that there are two (and only two) possible modes of being that things can possess: *being in itself* (the being of objects) and *being for itself* (the being of consciousness) (p. 365). However, we will see that this traditional dichotomy, typically thought of as mutually exclusive, is not so clear when we are examining the being of human consciousnesses who inhabit a shared world with other human consciousnesses. As Sartre argues, human beings are comprised of both *being-for-self* and *being-for-others*. Our being-for-self is the existence that we enjoy as individual subjectivities with a unique perspective and personal boundaries that separate us from other subjectivities; it is the being that allows us to make sense of the world on our own terms, to give things meaning, and to (sometimes) experience the world as existing for us. Our being-for-others, on the other hand, is the being that we possess as a result of the ways in which we exist *for others*; the world is filled with other unique subjectivities who can interpret us according to their own perspectives and, in doing so, objectify us through their gaze.

Our being is thus an ambiguous mixture of being-for-self and being-for-others, subjectivity and objectivity, activity and passivity. We are for others and we are for ourselves, and the lines between these states of being are not permanent and clear; our being-for-self and being-for-other overlap in places and bleed in and out of each other. We can never be fully objectified, but, because we can be objectified to varying degrees by the other, nor are we always full subjectivities. The fact that our being-for-self and being-for-other (and self and other, more generally) are inextricably interwoven and interrelated is something that will become especially clear in our discussion of early self-development.

Sartre provides a second example to illuminate our experience of other people and the impact that they have on us is the discussion of a man spying through a keyhole (pp. 347-350).

While the example of the park-goer illustrates the way in which the perspective of the other calls our perception and interpretation of the world into question, this example illustrates the way in which the perspective of the other calls our *sense of self* or *self-perception* into question.

Example #2: The Voyeur

Sartre's second example is that of a man ("the voyeur") who, for whatever selfish reason (Sartre's primary suggested motive is jealousy), decides to eavesdrop on a private conversation occurring behind closed doors (p. 347). To do this, he spies through a keyhole in the shut door. Sartre explains how, while alone, in the moment that he begins his spying, the voyeur is completely caught up in his own consciousness, losing himself to the world. His actions and his consciousness are unified in such a way that the voyeur exists *as his jealousy*, and all the world is drawn in towards him, centred around his subjectivity and the contents of his consciousness that now make up his present existence (pp. 347-348). Thus, the situation presents itself to the voyeur in a way such that the keyhole is merely an instrument to be looked through, and the private conversation a conversation that exists to be heard by him. (p. 348) He is entirely caught up in his situation.

Suddenly, however, the voyeur hears footsteps approaching him from behind and he realizes that he is now *being seen*. Someone else has entered the situation and this person is *looking at him* (pp. 348-350). In this moment, the voyeur is suddenly aware of himself as escaping himself. This time, however, he does not find himself escaping into his *own being*. Rather, he escapes himself insofar as the gaze of the other tugs him out of his subjectivity and pulls his identity away from him (p. 349). Here the other is not experienced as an object and cannot be experienced as such to the extent that the other's subjectivity is precisely what has made a claim on the identity of the voyeur. Not only is the world now polarized towards the other (as we saw happen in the first example of the park-goer), but so is the voyeur's very identity.

It is in this moment that the voyeur realizes that his identity will always escape him—that he will never be in full possession of himself. The other sees him and he sees him in a way that the voyeur can, in the absence of communication, neither understand nor access. Yet, the voyeur has the distinct experience of the other's perspective on who and what he is as being genuine. Sartre explains that:

Nevertheless I am that Ego; I do not reject it as a strange image, but it is present to me as a self which I am without knowing it; for I discover it in shame and, in other instances, in pride. It is shame or pride which reveals to me the Other's look and myself at the end of that look. It is the shame or pride which makes me live, not know, the situation of being looked at. (p. 350)

The experience of shame is the experience of "shame of self." Shame is the recognition that we are the object that the other is experiencing, looking at, and judging, and that the judgments the other makes about us escape us despite their importance. (p. 350) Furthermore, experiences like those of pride and shame reveal to us that the perspective of the other *actually matters* and carries with it a very real weight.

Thus, what this example illustrates is the way in which the other's freedom impacts us; the other is, by means of his own freedom, able to define us in ways that we cannot fully understand or access without the other granting us access to his perspective (as through communication). In this example, the other is not just looking at the world; he is looking *at you*. The other is no longer looking at a mere object; he is looking *at you as an object*. This causes us to realize that we escape ourselves. When the other looks at us, it is not only the world that he takes away from us, but a part of our personal identity. As a free and constituting consciousness, the other is able to assign value and meaning not just to ordinary objects, but to other people as well. Because of this, our own being and our personal identity always retain some level of ambiguity and indeterminacy; we may know (or think we know) who we are for ourselves, but we are also always defined by the others who surround us, and we are reliant on forming successful interpersonal connections with others in order to access their perspectives on who or what we are.

Re-establishing of the shared world through relations with the other.

Thus, these instances in which others objectify us call for us to find a way to access the other's perspective on who we are to them. Merleau-Ponty (2012) says:

However, strictly speaking, I do not have any common ground with other people; the positing of the other person with his world and the positing of myself with my world constitutes a dilemma. Once the other has been posited, or once the other's gaze upon me has stripped me of a part of my being by inserting me into his field, then it is clear that I can only recuperate my being by forming

relations with the other or by making myself freely recognized by him, and that my freedom requires that others have the same freedom. (p. 374)

We can access the other's perspective by getting to know him—by entering and sharing in his world. To do this, we must connect with the other, as through direct communication or the establishing of a relationship. Once the other has seen me, I have been made an object and, in order to bring my subjectivity back into myself, I must re-establish myself as a subject by using my own freedom and the powers of my body to engage with the other as equal. In communication with the other, this equality or reciprocity is established, as a mutual recognition between subjects is achieved that grants us access to the other's perspective.

Of course, because human consciousnesses are not (entirely) *private* consciousnesses, some information about the other's perspective can be obtained through paying attention to the other's body language, behaviour, and actions. Thus, we already have at least some ability to access other's perspective. However, to come to know the finer details of the other's way of seeing world and as a means of establishing a shared perspective, we have the power of *communication* and the cultural tool of *language*.

While the role of communication and language will be investigated more thoroughly in the next section, it is worth noting here that we are able to overcome our objectivity to some extent by re-identifying ourselves as a full subject in the face of the other, and that it is through communication with the other that we can do this. Through interacting with the other and by engaging in dialogue with him, we can come to learn at least some of what the other thinks about us; we can access the perspective of the other.

What Sartre's keyhole scenario describes is our experience of the other person as a full *subject* as opposed to a subject-made-into-an-object. When we experience the other as a full subject, we come to see ourselves as having a meaning for another person that we cannot fully access (or access at all, depending on the situation). The perspective of the other escapes us, and, in this way, some part of who we are always escapes us. Because other people can access our reality in ways that we never can, who we are always exceeds the boundaries of our own perspective. For example, because we are busy actually *living out* who we are, our friends are able to understand who we are in a summarized, cohesive way that we cannot. What this means is that we are reliant on other people for answers to the question of who we are—we must rely on others to help us discover or realize our very *identity*. Every person who is involved in our lives

has some opinion or perspective on who we are—what kind of person we are, what our value is, what sorts of things we are likely and unlikely to do. Because of this relationship to and dependence on the other, who we are for-ourselves—our personal take on who we are—is itself something that is constituted largely by our experience with and of others, and the feedback that they give us about ourselves.

However, it is important to be mindful that not all perspectives on us are accurate and not all of them will have a meaningful impact on our lives. The perspectives that others have on us are accurate to varying degrees, and the consequences that their perspectives can or will have on our lives are many and varied. For this reason, discretion and good judgment must be used when considering the ways in which others see us and in deciding which views we should take to heart. While there is no formula that can tell us how to discriminate successfully between the views on us that matter or should have priority and those that are incorrect or unimportant, good judgment should always be exercised.

Confirmation, ontological security, and the self.

Sartre has shown us, then, that we live in a shared world with other free subjectivities who each have their own perspectives on the world and on who we are. We first come to recognize the other as a distinct and separate object with a unique perspective on the world, and by then come to recognize the other as a full subject with agency who, through their perspective and their interpretation of us, defines who we are. Simultaneously, as we come to realize that other people live out their lives through their own perspective, we come to recognize the extent of our own agency and subjectivity; knowledge of the self as a distinct, unique hold on the world comes about because of our recognition of the full subjectivity and agency of others (i.e. it is only by coming to understand the ‘otherness’ of others that we come to fully appreciate our own selfhood).

Because of these realizations, the existence and near-presence of others begins to affect us in ways that it did not before; we find ourselves needing to know how the other’s view of the world may differ or overlap with our own, and if our sense of reality is shared. Additionally, and perhaps more importantly, in the second stage of our realization, when the other’s gaze falls on us, we find ourselves needing to find out from the other *who we are*. In other words, the

existence of the other as a subject sharing in our world raises the question of who we are—of what our own, personal identity is—and creates a need for recognition from the other (i.e. recognition not only of our subjectivity and agency, but also of the people that we take ourselves to be). This need to access the other's perspective on us and to be recognized by them creates a demand for communication and the establishing of relationships with other people.

The perspectives that others have on us and the recognition that they give (or do not give) us can impact our lives in many ways, with some being more obvious than others. More obviously, the ways in which others perceive us are useful in a practical or utilitarian sense. We need people to like us, to think we are competent and able, and we require the consent, permission, and acknowledgment of others for countless aspects of our regular lives. To have a career, a home, friends, a partner, and, in our society, to satisfy the most basic of our needs, like sexual desire and hunger, we require the consent and permission of other people. Whether we are able to get the things that we want can often depend on how we are seen by others.

Yet, it is not for mere utility that we care about what other people think about us. Our being-for-self—who we take ourselves to be—is largely shaped and informed by the opinions and perspectives of others and the relationships that we form with them. This is to say that our being-for-self and being-for-others are intimately interwoven and that they feed into each other. Who we are or who we take ourselves to be is, in large part, shaped by or defined by who we are for others. This never stops. Our interactions with others reveal to us what they think about us and the world(s) that we mutually inhabit, and this informs our sense of who we are and what reality is. In other words, there is not often a clear distinction between our being-for-self and our being-for-others; we are always a combination of both.

While who we take ourselves to be and who we are for others are intimately interwoven and related, they can be more or less compatible. Other people's views on who we are can agree or disagree (and to varying degrees) with our own opinions of ourselves. Whether people's views of us are in line with our own, whose view on us it is, and how they inform us of their perspective on who we are all play a role in determining how their perspective will impact us—whether it will have a negative impact on our sense of self or a positive one, whether we will be able to grow as a result of learning their perspective or if we will be held back by it.

As an example of the profound impact that others' perspectives on who we are have on us and the ways in which their recognition of our own sense of self can influence our self-

development, we can turn to R. D. Laing's (1961) notion of "confirmation" as outlined in his book *Self and Others*. Laing's implicit starting point is the acknowledgment that we are dependent on others not only for satisfaction of our basic and biological needs, but also for their permission, recognition, affirmation, intimacy, for a sense of who we are and what the world is like, and to confirm our sense of what is *real*—to affirm or deny our personal sense of *reality*. Laing notes that another way of framing our overwhelming dependency on other people for these things (and many others) is to say that we are constantly in need of (and *desire*) their *confirmation*.

What this means is that we need and want other people to, at the most basic level, recognize us as existing and as *people*—as free, individual subjectivities with the same agency and existential powers that they have. However, we also desire a more complex form of recognition: we want other people to recognize us as the particular people that we take ourselves to be or that we want to become (p. 82).

The most basic form of recognition (of others as subjects) is not, says Laing, something that we can wholly avoid giving to others. Whether we like it or not, we are always confirming the others that we encounter in some way and to some extent. As Laing says, confirmation is both "partial and varying in manner, as well as global and absolute" (p. 99). We cannot interact with other people without providing them with some measure of confirmation; that we are interacting or communicating with another person, regardless of the form that it takes, is already a testament to their subjectivity. The particular shape and duration of this basic type of confirmation can vary: it can come from a certain kind of look, from a smile, a nod or shake of the head, shouting an obscenity at someone who irritates us a "hello" to a stranger at the market, or a "sorry" after bumping into someone on a crowded street. In all of these instances we are acknowledging—*confirming*—the existence of the other person *for us* and *in our world* (p. 98). Thus, we can never completely fail to confirm someone.

However, Laing also acknowledges that it is simultaneously near-impossible for us to *wholly confirm* another person—to confirm every aspect of their being, their identity or their self-representation (p. 81). He states that the "total confirmation" of another person is, if not impossible, an extremely unlikely, "ideal possibility" (p.98). What this means is that, while we can confirm people to varying degrees and extents and in countless ways, we can never confirm a person in their totality; we cannot provide a complete confirmation of another person's self-

presentation, or understand, appreciate, and confirm the full significance that their experiences and feelings have for them. There is no such thing as an act of confirmation that would be one-hundred-percent confirmatory

Confirmation in general can take many different forms, and we may wish to receive confirmation in different ways, under different circumstances, or from different people. Confirmatory gestures can be visual, tactile, or auditory, can be brief or drawn out in their duration, can occur at different times and in different places, and can vary in intensity (p. 99). However, while confirmation can come in many forms, Laing identifies the basic parameters of what confirmation must be, especially in cases of the confirmation of person's sense of who they are:

A confirmatory response is *relevant* to the evocative action, it accords recognition to the evocatory act, and accepts its significance for the evoker, if not for the respondent. A confirmatory reaction is a direct response, it is 'to the point,' or 'on the same wavelength' as the initiatory or evocatory action. A partially confirmatory response need not be in agreement, or gratifying, or satisfying. Rejection can be confirmatory if it is direct, not tangential, and recognizes the evoking action and grants it significance and validity. (p. 99)

We can see here the emphasis that Laing puts on respecting and acknowledging the perspective of the other. Laing acknowledges the importance of recognizing and accepting that the other's plights, feelings, and projects are important *to him*, even if they do not seem important to you. If other people do not find the things that we are dealing with to be particularly significant or noteworthy, we would like, at the very least, for others to acknowledge that those things seem that way *to us*. We want other people to confirm our sense of who we are, who we can be, and who we want to become. We want others to confirm the significance of our past and present, and of the future that we are planning or striving for. We also want others to confirm our experience or sense of what is *real*; we want to know that we are actually in touch with reality and the primary means that we have of achieving this is through the confirmation that we receive from others. What makes the things that we are dealing with, our sense of self, and the way in which we see the world *real* is the acknowledgement and confirmation that we receive from others. It is through this confirmation that we are able to establish and maintain the sense that, despite our different perspectives, we are engaging with a *shared reality*.

This sense of sharing in a single reality (in which each of our own, personal realities unfolds) acts as the primary point of contact between the self and the countless other individuals

who surround us. Having a sense that we are all participating in a single, overarching reality also facilitates a sense of mutuality or togetherness between individuals. In this way, acts of confirmation help to bring individuals together. Through confirming one another, we can establish a reciprocity and mutual recognition that contributes to co-existence and the sense that we are *sharing* a single world or reality. As we will see in the section on communication, authentic, constructive communication can only happen when participants in dialogue confirm one another.

Acts of confirmation recognize the other as an agent and as a person, respect the boundaries between our own perspective and the perspective of the other while acknowledging the other person's experience as a *reality*. Confirmation is an acknowledgement that, despite co-existing within the greater context of a shared reality, we are nevertheless equally entitled to our own existence and our own take on the world, to evaluating things from our own perspective, and to having things that matter to us that do not matter to others. Furthermore, more thorough or intimate acts of confirmation acknowledge not only that we are full, free subjectivities, but that our perspective matters or has an impact on the world—that *we* actually matter. In other words, more profoundly confirmatory acts and gestures acknowledge that the individual's perspective, thoughts, feelings, and beliefs do not just matter to the individual, but that they also matter to others. Thus, confirmation is not so much an *agreement* with another person's perspective as it is the demonstration of an *appreciation* or *understanding* of the other's perspective. It is often the attempt at recognition of how or why the other experiences things the way that they do and an understanding that, regardless of how factually accurate the other's perception of their experiences may be, that they genuinely appear that way to the other and have the particular meaning for that person that they do. In this way, we are able to show the other that their hold on the world carries a real weight and genuinely matters to us, even if we do not necessarily see eye-to-eye or agree with them. Through such acts of confirmation, we acknowledge that other's perception of their situation is a genuine *reality* to them, even if it is not to us, or even if it is out of touch with the factual state of objective reality. However, acknowledging that something seems real to another person does not mean that it is actually the case, and it does not detract from the individual's answerability to shared, objective reality.

For example, let's consider a situation where my friend, Sally, goes to a new hair salon and, much to her dismay, ends up with a haircut that she hates. Sally cares very much about her

appearance and comes to me in tears. She says that she told the stylist she just wanted a trim, but the stylist didn't listen and cut her hair far too short. Now she is stuck (temporarily) with a haircut that she despises and that makes her feel very self-conscious. She tells me that she is embarrassed to be seen in public and doesn't feel like she can go to work tomorrow, or maybe even for several days. She insists that she is going to have to take time off work while she tries to find a way to "fix" her hair to whatever extent she can. From my point of view, Sally's hair looks fine and I think it is silly of her to refuse to go to work because of her hair. However, I also know Sally and have a pretty good understanding of her personal history; I know that she had an overbearing mother who was obsessed with appearances and who never allowed Sally to feel "good enough" or "pretty enough." I know that this is a big part of the reason why, as an adult, Sally is so obsessed with appearances and why something like getting an undesired haircut has such a big emotional impact on her. Now, in this example, Sally's reality is one in which her haircut is hideous and makes her feel badly about herself, and in which she cannot bring herself to go to work because her co-workers will notice and gossip about her "ugly" haircut. My reality, on the other hand, is one in which Sally's haircut looks quite nice and she is being silly and dramatic (after all, I would never call in sick to work because of a bad haircut!). Furthermore, from my point of view, most people would agree that being unhappy with one's hair is not a sanctioned excuse for missing work, and other people are not going to care as much about Sally's hair as she thinks they will. In fact, I'm not even sure that they will notice that she's had a haircut! Now, in this situation, it is likely the case that my perspective is more in touch with "objective," shared reality—with the actual state of the world. However, for my reaction to Sally's ordeal to be confirmatory, I need to appreciate that her perspective is very, very real to her; I need to convey to Sally that I understand and appreciate that her reality is, at least for now, what it is. In doing so, I convey to Sally that her perspective matters and carries a real weight to it. However, to help Sally reconcile her current perception of reality with what is actually the case, it may be necessary for me to help Sally realize that what she is struggling with here is a *past reality*; Sally is reacting to her present situation from within the confines of a difficult past in which her haircut really did matter to others (or, at least, to one, particular other: her mother). Sally's perception of her present situation is being altered and distorted by her lingering past, and what she is really struggling to come to terms with here is her relationship with her mother, not a bad haircut.

Recall that Laing notes, however, that confirmation does not necessitate agreement with or acceptance of another person or their perspective. Confirmation of another person or a particular act can involve rejection, disagreement, and discomfort. What is most important is that the act of rejection or disagreement be direct, to the point, and given in a way that demonstrates recognition and consideration of the other person's actions or feelings (p. 99). Direct, confirmatory rejection is "not tangential; it is not mocking or in other ways invalidating. It need neither depreciate nor exaggerate the original action. It is not synonymous with indifference or imperviousness" (p. 99). Laing notes, however, that any genuine rejection of a belief or action is itself confirmatory to some degree (though not sufficiently or largely confirmatory if it does not meet the aforementioned criteria). He says, "An action 'rejected' is perceived and this perception shows that it is accepted as a fact" (p.99).

In fact, it is *necessary* and *for the good of others* that we sometimes do things like disagree with them, and reject certain opinions or beliefs that they may have or actions that they may perform. Rejection can ultimately be a way of confirming an individual's potential, or of reminding that person of a self that they are losing touch with or have forgotten. This is to say that, sometimes, it is through confirmatory rejection that we can best show a person how much we care about them and their well-being. For example, let's consider a case where I have a close friend, Jane, who is very bright and talented, and who is striving to be a professional concert pianist. Jane is in her early-thirties and took up playing the piano in her twenties. She seems to have a good, natural talent to start from and she is certainly passionate about making beautiful music, but she does not have the same level of talent as other pianists who started playing at a younger age. She is also very serious about and committed to the idea of turning her love for playing the piano into a successful career. However, Jane has a bad habit of procrastinating and not managing her time effectively. As a result, Jane is constantly putting off practicing the piano and often finds herself without time to put in the hours of practice that would be necessary for her to achieve the level of talent that she is striving for. Jane often complains that she is unable to practice as much as she needs to because the people in her life are being too demanding of her time and unsupportive of her need to practice; she claims that other people are constantly distracting her and asking her to engage in other activities. In this case, because I care about Jane and want her to be successful, I cannot agree with her understanding of why she has not been successful in practicing as much as she needs to. Rather, what I *can do* is acknowledge Jane's

feelings of frustration and her perception that other people are interfering with her ability to practice playing the piano; I can convey to her that I understand how things might seem that way from her perspective. I can appreciate that she is having genuine difficulty balancing her desire to spend time engaging in social activities with other people and aiding them in the completion of their projects with her own desire to become an excellent pianist. However, while doing this, I can also disagree with her claim that her inability to practice is due exclusively or primarily to interference from others and, in a caring and constructive way, I can try to demonstrate to her how, from my perspective, it seems like what is more so the case is that her long-standing bad habits of procrastination and having difficulty prioritizing her obligations are the primary causes for her inability to practice. I could then, perhaps, help Jane think of some ways to manage her time more effectively. In this way, I can disagree with Jane's perspective while nevertheless confirming the significance that it has for her. Furthermore, disagreeing with Jane's own view of her situation is, in this case, something that I do because I genuinely care about her and want her to be happy and successful in her endeavours. If I were to agree with her, I would ultimately be doing her more harm than good. By agreeing with Jane, I might make her feel good in the moment, but I would not be helping her actualize the potential that she has and would not be contributing to her long-term happiness. In other words, agreeing with Jane's misplaced sense of responsibility for her time-management would mean disconfirming or failing to appreciate her potential for success. In this way, this example also highlights one instance of what Laing means when he says that it is near-impossible for someone to confirm another person *entirely*. Laing claims that confirmation falls along a spectrum, with total disconfirmation and complete confirmation falling at the extreme ends of that continuum. Most acts of confirmation, says Laing, fall somewhere in the middle, and we frequently only give others "partial confirmation." We must often choose between confirming and encouraging various aspects of a person or their situation, and Laing notes that even a single action "may be confirmed at one level and disconfirmed at another" (p. 99). In cases where we must choose between aspects or levels of a person's decisions and actions, it is important that we exercise good judgment in order to determine which aspect of a person or their situation requires confirmation the most, or which way of confirming someone is likely to lead to the most significant positive outcome for that person.

Furthermore, Laing explains that “[a]n aspect of oneself negated by one person may be endorsed by another” (p.100). This is to say that, while it may be the case that no person can, on their own, confirm us in our entirety, the confirmation that we do not get from one person can often be received from another. It is the total sum of confirmation that we receive from all our interpersonal relationships that ought to help us feel confirmed in our totality, not the confirmation that we receive from one person. Of course, this is not to suggest that this process of accumulating confirmation is always easy or possible. Others’ views on who we are will sometimes be at odds, and we ought not to simply pick and choose to believe whichever perspectives suit our needs or make us feel best about ourselves. When perspectives on who we are disagree, we are called upon to determine whose perspective is more accurate and trustworthy. However, while it may involve some effort and a lot of good judgment, it is nevertheless possible to receive confirmation of who we are or certain aspects of who we are from more than one person, and, because of this, to experience our total selves as more or less confirmed.

In contrast to confirmation, the *disconfirmation* of another person denies the validity of their perspective and their hold on the world, and suggests that our own perspective is somehow more valid, important, or real than the other’s. Of course, our perspectives will sometimes be more factually accurate or representative of the objective reality of a situation than the perspectives of others (e.g. individuals experiencing a psychotic or hallucinogenic episode are far more removed from shared reality than an individual who is not).¹ However, the accuracy of our own perspective does not detract from the significance of the other’s perspective *as he or she experiences it*; each individual has their own, personal experience of reality that falls more-or-less in line with objective, shared reality.

Laing goes on to explain how extreme cases of disconfirmation (whether deliberate or not) often manifest in or result in an attempt by the individual doing the disconfirming to *objectify* the other person and deny his agency, to force his perspective onto the other, to try to mould the other into the particular person that he wants the other to be, to force the other into suiting his own needs, or to try to swallow the other up in his own perspective on the world (p.101).

¹ (This is not to say, however, that an individual experiencing a psychotic episode or some kind of hallucination is *entirely* removed from “objective,” shared reality.)

Just as confirmation has a positive impact on individuals, contributing to a healthy sense of self and a sense of being in touch with reality, *disconfirmation* has an opposite, negative impact on these things. Now, while being disconfirmed is not likely to be a pleasant affair under any circumstances, it is most often not life-altering or traumatic. We are disconfirmed or confirmed inadequately on a regular basis, as when people ignore the things we say or override us in conversation to make their own point. For example, we are disconfirmed every time we hold a door open for someone and they fail to thank us, or when someone sees us smile and fails to smile back.

In general, childhood is a time when it is especially important for an individual (and especially an individual's budding sense of who they are and who they want to be) to be confirmed. Most people need a great deal of consistent confirmation during their childhood years to grow into healthy, stable, well-functioning individuals with a strong and positive sense of self and of what is real.

However, Laing stresses that, for certain individuals and at certain times in an individual's life (most often, sometime during their childhood), confirmation can be *absolutely critical*. For many people, there are certain parts of who they are or of their experience that are especially in need of confirmation. For these people, disconfirmation of those particular traits or experiences poses the risk of negatively impacting self-development, causing trauma, or even leading to the development of mental illness. Laing says, "Some areas of a person's being may cry out for confirmation more than others. Some forms of disconfirmation may be more destructive of self-development than others. One may call these [forms of disconfirmation] schizogenic" (pp. 99-100).

Laing makes clear that "At different periods of life, the practical or felt need for, and modes of, confirmation or disconfirmation vary, both as to the aspects of the person's being in question and as to the modes of confirming or disconfirming particular aspects" (p. 100). Thus, which aspects of a person's being are most vulnerable and which disconfirmatory acts will count as *schizogenic* will vary depending on the individual and on the particular time in their life. However, Laing provides an example of a common experience of disconfirmation that can prove to be deeply troubling and developmentally-critical for many people. The situation that Laing explains is one in which the parents of a child continuously and consistently actively *confirm* a "false self" (i.e. a fictional identity that the parents have come up with for the child) in their child

while simultaneously *disconfirming* the child's 'true self' (i.e. who the child takes himself to be and actually is) (pp. 100-101). Laing continues to explain how, in cases like these, it is often the case that no one in the family catches on to this state of affairs, and that the "schizogenic potential" of this situation is found primarily in the way in which none of the family members are even aware of what they are doing—that no one has noticed that their child is someone other than the fictional image that they are confirming, and that the child is experiencing great tension and discomfort as a result of this situation (pp. 100-101). A fairly obvious example of this could be the case of a family refusing to acknowledge or accept that one of their children self-identifies as being homosexual, gender-fluid, or transgender, and where that family continues to treat that child as though they were heterosexual or "cisgender." Perhaps this family does not notice the child's self-identification and self-expression at all, or perhaps they write off the child's sense of self as being a "phase" or a case of being *confused*, of being "mistaken" about their own identity. In this way, the child's sense of who they are is disconfirmed and over-written with someone else's definition (Laing, 1960, pp.99-101).

Cases like the aforementioned one constitute instances of what Laing calls "pseudo-confirmation" (p.100). Acts of pseudo-confirmation adopt the guise of genuine confirmation and "go through the motions," so to speak, while lacking the content, motivation, and target that would make the act count as genuinely confirmatory (Laing, 1961, p. 100). In cases where family members reinforce a child's fictional self-identity without acknowledging the child's self-established identity, it can often *appear* as though the child is receiving confirmation. For example, we could consider a case where a child's parents have decided that their child is a bright, studious child who excels at academics and who will go on to be a medical doctor someday. That child, however, actually sees themselves as a more "artistic" (as opposed to "analytic" or "scientific) person, and has a passion for creative writing. By complimenting their child's intellectual brightness and academic successes in the sciences, helping their child enrol in science fairs and maths competitions, and bragging to their friends about how their child will someday go on to become a great medical doctor, it may *appear* to most people that the child's parents are being supportive and confirmatory in their actions. However, because what is being confirmed is a false self that the child does not identify with, and because the child's personal sense of self is being ignored and invalidated, the child is merely receiving pseudo-confirmation.

Laing explains that the aforementioned set of circumstances (i.e. cases of repeated disconfirmation of a child's "true self" or self-identified-self) is one that studies have found to be prominent within many families, and that can be linked to the development of schizophrenia (p. 100). He explains that, surprisingly and contrary to what was previously believed to be the case, many individuals who develop schizophrenia later in life do not come from households in which they were neglected in "obvious" ways, abused, or traumatized. Rather, they come from households in which they are "subjected to subtle but persistent disconfirmation, usually unwittingly" (p.100).

A person's sense of *ontological security* is one of the most important factors in determining how significant or damaging acts of disconfirmation will be. In *The Divided Self* (1960), Laing begins his discussion of ontological security by saying:

A man may have a sense of his presence in the world as a real, alive, whole, and, in a temporal sense, a continuous person. As such, he can live out into the world and meet others: a world and others experienced as equally real, alive, whole, and continuous. (p.39)

Such a person is, according to Laing, *ontologically secure*. A person who experiences himself and others in this way will experience himself (i.e. his identity) and reality as firmly grounded and stable (p. 39). As a result, says, Laing, such a person will be able to experience himself (and his world) as having a strong foundation that can weather and resist the various hazards and trials that may come his way (p. 39). Laing goes on to explain that an ontologically secure person "may experience his own being... as differentiated from the rest of the world in ordinary circumstances so clearly that his identity and autonomy are never in question" (p. 41). In this way, the other person experiences both himself and his world as *real*.

In contrast, a person who is ontologically *insecure* is likely to experience himself as being less real or having a weaker grip on reality, and of having an unstable or undetermined personal identity. As a result, an ontologically insecure individual is not able to experience everyday happenings and challenges as unproblematic and easy to handle. In fact, Laing explains that:

The individual in the ordinary circumstances of living may feel more unreal than real; in a literal sense, more dead than alive; precariously differentiated from the rest of the world, so that his identity and autonomy are always in question. He may lack the experience of his own temporal continuity. He may not possess an over-riding sense of personal consistency or cohesiveness. He

may feel more insubstantial than substantial, and unable to assume that the stuff he is made of is genuine, good, and valuable. And he may feel his self as partially divorced from his body. (p. 42)

Because of this lack of an inner sense of security, the ontologically insecure person is also unable to experience external reality as offering meaningful security; he does not experience the world as a secure place within which he can exist safely or consistently, or, perhaps, at all (p. 42). The world is more likely to appear to the ontologically insecure individual as hostile, unforgiving, or as lacking space to accommodate his existence.

Similar to the way in which the ontologically insecure person perceives the *world* differently from the ontologically secure person, the ontologically insecure person also has a different experience of *other people*. Laing explains that: “in the individual whose own being is secure [...], relatedness with others is potentially gratifying; whereas the ontologically insecure person is preoccupied with preserving rather than gratifying himself: the ordinary circumstances of living threaten his *low threshold* of security” (p. 42).

When a primary position of ontological security has not been reached, then “the ordinary circumstances of everyday life constitute a continual and deadly threat [to the individual’s existence” (p. 42). This is to say that, to the ontologically insecure person, daily happenings that would seem trivial and uneventful to most other people are “experienced as deeply significant in so far as they either contribute to the sustenance of the individual’s being or threaten him with non-being” (p. 43). Laing goes on to say that: “Such an individual, for whom the elements of the world are coming to have, or have come to have, a different hierarchy of significance from that of the ordinary person, is beginning, as we say, ‘to live in a world of his own’, or has already come to do so” (p.43).

It is not accurate, however, to say that such individuals are out of touch with reality and have a weak reality principle, or that the individual is “withdrawing into himself.” Laing argues that the factual state of things is quite the opposite: while it is true that external events no longer impact the ontologically insecure person in the same way that they do others, it is not the case they affect him less. Rather, Laing argues that they usually affect him *more*. Thus, it is usually not the case that the ontologically insecure individual is “indifferent” or “withdrawn”; it is more so the case that his experience of reality has become so different from or so much more intense than that of other people that he does not feel like his experience of reality is one that can be shared; he does not experience the world or others as being able to relate to or accommodate his

perspective, or he perceives the gap between his perspective and the perspectives of others to be too great to mend (Laing, 1960, p. 43).

One's sense of ontological security seems to be largely dependent on the transition that each individual makes from the peaceful co-existence of childhood (in which self and other are not yet clearly distinct, and there is no recognition of the perspectives that we each have on the world), to an understanding of the self as a subject with a unique perspective on the world that is not necessarily shared by the many other individual subjectivities that share in our reality. This is to say that our sense of ontological security is intimately bound up with (or is the result of) our coming to realize fully that there are boundaries between the self and everyone else that mark out the space of existence of one's own subjectivity and the subjectivity of others.

Drawing largely from Sartre, Laing acknowledges that the self is comprised of both a sense of being separate and distinct from others, but intimately interrelated; we are necessarily both autonomous and related to others in an inescapable way (pp. 52-53). A person who is ontologically secure not only understands this, but *experiences it* in and through all the moments of his life. Such a person is capable of sustaining his own being in the absence of others, when he is alone, and also of sustaining his being when he is in the presence of others (i.e. he does not lose himself in the other's being) (p. 52). Laing explains:

The capacity to experience oneself as autonomous means that one has really come to realize that one is a separate person from everyone else. No matter how deeply I am committed in joy or in suffering to someone else, he is not me, and I am not him. However lonely or sad one may be, one can exist alone. The fact that the other person in his own actuality is not me, is set against the equally real fact that my attachment to him is a part of me. If he dies or goes away, he has gone, but my attachment to him persists. (p. 52)

From birth, we are intimately attached and related to other people. A person who is on a path to developing a firm sense of ontological security has the experience that, even though we eventually come to realize the boundaries that separate self and other, there is always a trace of one in the other; in living, other people influence and shape our sense of self and experiencing of the world, leaving their mark on our being. Simultaneously, our actions and behaviours and the relationships that we form influence others, leaving a trace of our own existence in the existence of the other. As we noted earlier, our being-for-self and being-for-others are intimately interrelated and, ultimately, inseparable.

In contrast to this, a person who is ontologically *insecure* does not fully experience his being-for-self and being-for-others; he does not experience both facets of his being as existing realities, and does not experience them as simultaneously separate and being intimately related. Ontological insecurity is often marked by a sense of the other determining the self or consuming it, or of the inverse—of the self swallowing up the other. Laing explains:

If the individual does not feel himself to be autonomous this means that he can experience neither his separateness from, nor his relatedness to, the other in the usual way. A lack of sense of autonomy implies that one feels one's being to be bound up in the other, or that the other is bound up in oneself, in a sense that transgresses the actual possibilities within the structure of human relatedness. It means that a feeling that one is in a position of ontological dependency on the other (i.e. dependent on the other for one's very being) is substituted for a sense of relatedness and attachment to him based on genuine mutuality. (Laing, 1960, p. 53)

Laing goes on to explain that such an ontologically insecure person typically lives at one of two extremes: (1) the individual leads a life of complete isolation, detaching themselves as much as possible from other people, or (2) the individual leads a life of dramatic dependency, feeding off others (or a particular other) as though she were a “clam- or vampire-like attachment” (p. 53). The ontologically insecure person, according to Laing, usually spends her life perpetually alternating between these two extremes.

Conclusion.

We have learned that, from birth, we have an experience of other people as being other bodily intentionalities; there is never any need for us to look for other consciousnesses or to justify their existence through reason or logic. Our own bodies immediately apprehend the other's bodily existence, and recognize in the other a bodily intentionality that is revealed through the other's external behaviours. We directly experience the other's bodily engagements as meaningful and as an expression of the other's subjectivity.

Thus, our initial experience of the self and the world reveals to us that we are not alone. We initially find ourselves existing within the context of a shared, communal world in which we co-exist with others. Our first experience of the world is determinate and presents itself as absolute; we find ourselves situated within a particular culture and society that has already been defined by the many others who have preceded us and that shapes our sense of reality, and we

are able to take for granted that the unique way in which we see the world is the way that the world actually is. This is to say that, though each person already has a unique perspective on the world, we are not yet aware of this disparity in perspectives, and we instead have an experience of the world and others as being unified in a way that they are not.

However, we gradually come to the realization that, despite sharing a world and a reality with others, each individual has their own perspective on the world—a perspective that is distinct and potentially at odds with our own. Eventually, through the ways in which the other impresses his own perspective on the world that we previously experienced as existing for us, we come to fully experience the other *as other*—as a unique subjectivity with the same powers as us. This realization of the other as a distinct perspective on the world is what is revealed in Sartre’s example of the park-goer. We come to the realization that the other has his own grasp on our reality, and, in order for us to confirm the sharedness of that reality and to learn how the other’s perspective may differ from our own, we must find a way of accessing the other’s perspective. It is with this realization that we first begin to experience the demand to find a way to access the other’s perspective.

This perceived need to find a means of re-connecting with the other and accessing his perspective becomes most prominent and dire when we fully realize the subjectivity of the other. This is achieved through recognition that we exist as an object for the other and that the other therefore has a perspective on who we are. Because the other is a full subjectivity with his own grasp on the world, when his gaze is turned towards us the other objectifies us in much the same way that he does other objects, and, by forming a unique perspective on our identity, he creates his own definition of who we are. Thus, who we are—how the other perceives us—exceeds our grasp in much the same way that the rest of the world and its objects do. In this way, we begin to experience a tension between two distinct but intimately interwoven aspects of the self: our being-for-self and our being-for-others.

It is realized that, to access the other’s perspective on us and thus comprehend our place in the other’s world, we must connect with the other and form a relationship with him. In particular, communication is the primary means by which we may access the other’s perspective. As we will see in the next section, in communicating with the other we establish a “being-shared-by-two,” which is, essentially, the temporary re-establishment of the peaceful coexistence that we first experience in childhood. While we are engaged in reciprocal, authentic

communication with the other, the distinction between our being-for-self and our being-for-others is suspended, and we re-emerge as united with the other in a shared perspective. Thus, though we emerge from our early experiences of the world as individuals, we are never fully separated from others, and the possibility of re-connecting with the other and sharing in each other's perspectives is always maintained.

However, an exploration of Laing's (1960) examination of human interrelatedness expands on the thinking of Merleau-Ponty and Sartre, revealing to us in new terms the ways in which our being-for-self and being-for-others can be at odds or taken up in problematic ways, and demonstrates to us the importance of our interactions with others. Laing's notion of confirmation offers us a basic sketch of the profound impact that we can have on the other's sense of self and reality, showing us that communication is not something that should be taken lightly or taken for granted. If we interact with others in ways that are confirmatory, then it is possible for us to contribute to the other's healthy sense of self, a stable sense of reality, and positive self-development. On the other hand, when we disconfirm others, we can do great harm, making the other feel less real or unimportant, and contributing to an unhealthy, damaging sense of self.

Thus, what our examination of our most basic experiences of the world and of others reveals to us is that who we are for-ourselves (our being-for-self) constantly slips in and out of and intermingles with who we are for-others (our being-for-others), and that these things can be at odds with one another. It is here—in this tension that exists between our being-for-self and being-for-others—where we find one of the most profound existential crises that we experience and live. That our being and our identity are comprised of these two facets of our experience is an unavoidable and inescapable result of our existence as embodied consciousnesses that are perpetually perceiving and capable of being perceived by others. The existence of other people is as indubitable as our own existence, and their existence as conscious subjectivities is revealed to us firsthand through our experience. It is because others are free, conscious subjectivities with their own perspectives that they can alter our experience of the world and of ourselves, changing the meaning of our surrounding and our own experiences, and potentially taking us away from ourselves or giving us something of ourselves back. Who and what we are for others is a mystery—an intimate and disturbing *secret* that others can choose to keep from us eternally or to reveal to us through communication and forming relationships with us. Because there are as

many perspectives on who we are as there are people who perceive us and because we cannot access much of the other's perspective without his permission and assistance, it is necessary that the relationship between our being-for-self and being-for-others always contain some trace of *tension*. As we will see throughout the remainder of this project, how we choose to handle and resolve this tension has a significant impact on who we take ourselves to be, who we become, and who we *can* become, and the quality of our lives can differ dramatically depending on our handling of the conflict of our being-for-self and being-for-others.

1.1.2 Section Two: Expression and Communication

As we have seen, we enter the world as embodied beings and it is *through* the body that we experience the world and others, and live out our lives. It is our bodies that grant us the powers of perception and action that we rely on to navigate the world. Our bodies are *perceptual* or *perceptive bodies*, and it is only through perception that we have a world at all. It is through the body that we perceive other people and, in turn, experience being perceived by others. Furthermore, our unyielding, permanent perceptual capabilities are the inauguration of our consciousness in the world. This section will focus on one of the most important powers that the body possesses: the power of *expression* or *communication*. It is this power of expression that allows us to communicate with others and establish inter-personal relationships, connecting our personal perspective to the perspectives of others.

Merleau-Ponty (2012) refers to the body as “a natural power of expression” (p. 187), demonstrating that we are only able to express ourselves insofar as we have a body that is itself expressive. This power of expression is particularly important both as the means by which we communicate with others, and also as the way in which we make new discoveries about ourselves and the world, and come to have new and original thoughts (p.183).

As humans, we are capable of expressing ourselves in various ways and through various means. We can convey meaning and express things through explicit physical gestures, body language, emotional expressions, the use of language, and various forms of visual arts, music and poetry, and, as we will see later on, through play. However, the form of expression and communication that Merleau-Ponty highlights as being particularly significant to our

understanding, learning, and to our interpersonal engagements is *language*, and, more specifically, *speech*.

The act of speaking is, for Merleau-Ponty, the most important and fundamental way that we have of *giving thoughts to ourselves* (p. 183). That is, for him, the act of inner or outer speech *is itself thought* (i.e. speech is the *actualization* or *accomplishment* of thought). This is to say that, for Merleau-Ponty, thought is not something essentially or originally non- or pre-verbal that is lingering around somewhere in the head or out in the world waiting to be discovered, nor is speech merely a representation of discovered or uncovered thought. Words are not mere, empty symbols representing ghostly, formless thoughts that swim around inside of us, waiting to be translated into speech. Rather, *speech accomplishes thought* (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, p. 183).

For Merleau-Ponty, we have not truly thought something through until we have spoken it, whether in the presence of others or to ourselves. This does not mean, however, that there is nothing before speech. Merleau-Ponty does not deny that there exists a certain sense or feeling prior to thought that hints to us that there is something to be discovered—that there is something yearning to be thought, to be *spoken*. Rather, it appears he acknowledges this as the natural progression of things when he says that “thought tends toward expression as if toward its completion.” (p. 182) The “beginning” of thought can be said to be the *sense* or feeling that something is present; that something is waiting to be uncovered or created, or that is, as of yet, incomplete. Speech is, thus, the completion—the filling in or bringing into being—of something that is experienced as lacking.

Merleau-Ponty notes that it is often the case that we pick up on a certain sense or have a feeling that there is something waited to be completed—to be spoken, and that these feelings are only understood or realized through the act of speaking or naming them. He notes that even familiar objects can appear indeterminate if we cannot remember their name, and that the subject engaged in ‘thought’ is ignorant of what he is thinking so long as he has not found the words to express them (pp. 182-183).

We experience the world as calling out to us to express it, it demands expression. Expression, communication, and language are such an essential part of what it is to be a living, human body that the thought of living without engaging in such acts seems almost unfathomable. Furthermore, what this shows is that speech and other forms of expression are *necessary* for us to make sense of the world, to inhabit it and share it with its other inhabitants, and to make sense of

the self. If the only way that I have of understanding what I truly think is to put it into words, then I could never properly understand myself—what I truly think and believe, or what I desire—without engaging in linguistic communication. Furthermore, as we will see, because language is a culturally-shared and constituted entity—because it is something that is created, learned, and used by and with others, it gives us access to ways of thinking and perceiving that we would not be capable of on our own, without the assistance of a culturally-constituted, historic body of meaning.

To further demonstrate the importance of language and the role that it plays in our lives, Merleau-Ponty distinguishes between what he calls “second-order” and “first-order” speech (p.189). It is a fact that language is something that is inherited just as much as other cultural idiosyncrasies. When we are born, we are born into a linguistic milieu that is already full of “available significations”—words that have been established by their repeated use throughout history and that already possess commonly-understood definitions (p. 189). Furthermore, we come to understand the common and appropriate uses of these words, the grammatical structure that speech ought to take, the meaning of particular sayings and phrases, and we build up habitual ways of speaking that we make use of in our regular interactions with the world. It is this inheritance of a shared, already-established lexicon of meanings and phrases that Merleau-Ponty calls second-order speech, and it is this type of speech that allows us to communicate linguistically with others in the first place—it provides a shared platform through which we can exchange thoughts with others.

Thus, second-order speech is the language that is *given to us* as complete or ready-made, that is structured, controlled, and determined by others, and that we use because it is the standard, recognizable, and communally-understood way of communicating with one another in a shared society of conscious, embodied, communicative subjectivities. This is to say that second-order speech is the mundane, repetitive, highly-structured form of speech that we engage in most commonly. It is the type of speech that we engage in when we talk idly about the weather, when we report local news events to one another, when we order a cup of coffee or a plate of spaghetti, when we ask for favours or make other practical requests of others, or when we are writing a resume. This way of speaking is useful and is an important part of lives. Yet, with second-order speech we are not creating or discovering anything *new* or *novel*, and we are

not transforming ourselves or our understanding of the world. Second-order speech is what gets us through our day-to-day interactions with others and within broader society.

A large part of the significance of second-order speech is found in the way in which it provides us with the building blocks that are necessary to experience *first-order* speech (p. 189). First-order speech is the experience of having originary thoughts or of understanding something for the first time through speech. Merleau-Ponty describes first-order speech as the transformation of “a certain silence into speech” (p. 189). It is the injecting of new meaning into the world or the gifting of a new sense to familiar words and phrases. As was mentioned earlier, while genuine thought does not exist as separate from speech, it remains the case that there are still times when we pick up on a certain sense or feeling but that we only come to understand what that sense was once we have put it into words. First-order speech is the transformation of a certain silence or ambiguous sense into something more concrete and determinate, or the creation of a new meaning or sense altogether. Thus, first-order speech could also be called *creative speech* or *revelatory speech*. First-order speech is not bound to the strict and precise rules that govern language in the same way that second-order speech is; it permits, tolerates, and makes use of deviation from the norm, and allows for a change in meaning or use of conventional grammatical structures and semantics. As examples of first-order speech, Merleau-Ponty notes that we can see instances of first-order speech most prominently in the writer who first discovers and creates his story by putting words down on the blank page, in the work of philosophers and poets, and in the case of the child who is first learning how to speak (i.e. who is first discovering the world and making sense of it) (p. 189). In these cases, the speaker is engaging in first-order speech by taking up the arsenal of second-order speech that is available to him and using it to create or discover new meaning. Thus, first-order speech is what we often find in poetry, literature, artistic pieces that make use of language, and when we use familiar words in new and novel ways to bring into being a new meaning.

The next significant point about language and our communicative abilities that we must note is that we can have thoughts through communication with others that we could not have on our own. As we saw in the previous section about our experience of other people, communication is the primary means that we have of connecting with others and accessing their perspectives. The role of speech in our interpersonal dealings is so important that Merleau-Ponty says that “Speech alone is capable of sedimenting and of constituting an intersubjective

acquisition” (pp. 195-196). I am able to communicate with others successfully insofar as I have a knowledge of the other’s use of language—his vocabulary and his syntax (p. 189). Because we share a public language, we have a mutual understanding of second-order speech that provides us with the common meanings and uses of the words that make up our language.

This understanding of a particular lexicon, however, is neither the sole condition for our ability to communicate successfully nor the most important one. What I am understanding and relating to in my linguistic interactions with others is not a mere “representation” of some objective phenomenon or thought. Communication is not primarily the skill of being able to recognize the particular words that my interlocutor offers to me and to decrypt their meaning or recognize their symbolism (p. 189). Merleau-Ponty says:

I do not primarily communicate with “representations” or with a thought, but rather with a speaking subject, with a certain style of being, and with the “world” that he aims at. Just as the significative intention that initiated the other person’s speech is not an explicit thought, but rather a certain lack that seeks to be fulfilled, so too is my taking up this intention not an operation of my thought, but rather a synchronic modulation of my own existence, a transformation of my being. (p. 189)

In other words, the meaning and the sense of the words that my interlocutor shares with me are grasped only from the words themselves and the way in which my interlocutor delivers them (p. 184). Speech itself possesses a “gestural signification” that is non-reducible and that must be recognized as inherent to what speech is. It is only because speech is a genuine gesture containing its own sense—a sense that *belongs to it*—that we can communicate at all, and our experience of communicating with another person is the experience of a certain *synchronicity* between speaking subjects, between my private existence and the subjectivity of the other (p. 189).

While other views see the word as an “empty envelope,” Merleau-Ponty understands that “the word, far from being the simple sign of objects and significations, inhabits things and bears significations” (pp. 182-183). Merleau-Ponty explains that thought is neither an “inner” process nor an externally-existing thing separate from speech (p.189). This is to say that the word itself bears the sense of what it is expressing and the person who is listening to a speaker receives their thoughts on that speech from the speech itself in act of genuine gestural reciprocity (pp. 183-184). What tricks us into believing that thought is something naturally “inner” is that we possess a full vocabulary of second-order language and memories of conversations that we can recall

privately, thus making it appear we have an “inner life” (p. 189). Yet this inner life is not the origin of thought, and what this “inner life” also reveals to us is that, by recalling conversations we have had with others and clinging to our thoughts about others, we are living as interpersonal entities even when we are alone. Speech and thought are enveloped in each other in a way that makes them inseparable. Merleau-Ponty says that “[S]ense is caught in speech, and speech is the external existence of sense” (p. 187). An angry word or gesture does not make me think of anger, it is anger itself (p. 190).

Merleau-Ponty explains that, when we engage in expressive communication with others (whether verbal or non-verbal), we are actually engaging in an act of taking up the other person’s perspective, or what Merleau-Ponty calls “a power of thinking according to others” (p. 184). For communication of any kind to be reciprocal and successful, I must be able to slip into the perspective of my interlocutor, and my interlocutor must be able to slip into mine. In talking about the understanding of bodily gestures, Merleau-Ponty explains:

Communication or the understanding of gestures is achieved through the reciprocity between my intentions and the other person’s gestures, and between my gestures and the intentions which can be read in the other person’s behavior. Everything happens as if the other person’s intention inhabited my body, or as if my intentions inhabited his body. The gesture I witness sketches out the first signs of an intentional object... The gesture is in front of me like a question; it indicates to me specific sensible points in the world and invites me to join it there. Communication is accomplished when my behaviour finds in this pathway its own pathway. I confirm the other person, and the other person confirms me. (pp. 190-191)

Here Merleau-Ponty is talking about “bodily gestures.” Speech (and the use of language more generally) is necessarily a bodily gesture, as it is a communicative gesture that we perform by means of the body. This is to say that speech is a bodily behaviour. Thus, what Merleau-Ponty is talking about here also applies to all forms of linguistic communication. While we learned a bit about R. D. Laing’s (1961) account of *confirmation* in the previous section, and while the concept of confirmation will be explored again in our discussion of the phenomenon of play, we can conclude that what it means here, for Merleau-Ponty, is both a form of *identification* and *understanding*. It is identification insofar as we must identify with the other person and successfully take up and inhabit their perspective for communication to be successful, and it is understanding in that the sense, meaning, and content carried within the other person’s communicatory gesture is apprehended. This *synchronicity* or *reciprocity* that is essential to

successful and meaningful communication between subjects precisely *is* the confirmation of the other's perspective. The achievement of this synchronicity or confirmation is dependent on our ability and willingness to inhabit the other's perspective at the same time as we share our own perspective and open it up to the other.

Thus, genuine communication is more than the mere exchanging of thought or meaning; it is the opening up and revealing of distinct perspectives on the world, and a mutual inhabitation of these perspectives. Genuine communication is the accessing of another person's unique hold on the world—it is to be able to think and speak according to the other person's individual way of experiencing the world while simultaneously granting the other access to your own world. When perspectives are shared, there is a breakdown of the “I” and the “you” that represent our individualistic ways of being, and the opening up and establishing of an “*us*.” When confirmation of the kind that Merleau-Ponty describes does not occur, it is likely to lead to misunderstanding, or can even cause the attempted communication to fail altogether. Genuine communication, then, is the opening of a shared field of experience in which perspectives merge; I can make intimate contact with the thoughts and beliefs of the other through our union in speech. However, it remains the case that I can never fully access the perspective of the other, or that I can only access it for a duration of time. This is because we can never fully connect with others; we can never fully integrate the other into ourselves and our own perception of the world because each individual has a unique personal history that has shaped his or her hold on the world. While it is the case that we can merge with others through intimate, communicative acts, and while our personal histories may overlap in places, we nevertheless remain distinct, each living from within a unique context.

It is only within this shared field of understanding in which all parties permit the mutual overlap of perspectives that successful, genuine communication can occur, and it is only when this happens that we are really thinking and speaking with others. It is only by thinking with and according to others—that is, by engaging in genuine dialogue—that we are able to expand our perspectives and come to know things that we could not have known otherwise. My particular body, personal history, sense of self, relationships with others, and overall posture towards the world grant me a unique perspective. This perspective is, however, limited. Each person has a unique relationship with the world, and this individuality curses us with a limited view of things. Yet, because we do not exist as fully separated and closed off from one another—because we are

inherently intersubjective beings with the power to form relationships with others—we are capable of transcending our limited perspective and seeing the world from as many different views as there are people we can communicate with. As Merleau-Ponty says, “we have the power to understand beyond what we could have spontaneously thought” (p. 184). By engaging in meaningful, first-order communication with others, we are allowing others to inform and expand our perspectives. As a result, our perspectives on the world are constantly being influenced and overturned, even if we do not always realize it. For example, in talking with a friend I may come to realize that a song I have been listening to often without understanding why actually relates to my personal history in a very profound way (perhaps it relates to my childhood experiences with my siblings). In coming to realize this connection between a song that I had found myself inexplicably drawn to and my personal history, I not only come to understand the song in a new way, but I may also come to see the aspects of my personal history that the song relates to in a new and meaningful way.

The realm of already-available significations that we have access to (i.e. what we have called *second-order speech*) is what provides a common world of language in which we can all share and participate (p. 192). In other words, it is because of the availability of a common, shared, mutually-understood language that we can share complex thoughts and ideas at all. We could not, however, enjoy the full potential of this language to transcend itself and become first-order thought if we did not engage in genuine dialogue with others. It is precisely because the other has his own, unique perspective on the world and who I am that I can learn from him; the other can reveal to me ways of understanding the world that I would not have realized otherwise, and can teach me things about *myself* that I never could discover from within my own, limited perspective. Our self-perspective on who we are is incomplete and lacking; it is *insufficient* for us to gain a rich and thorough understanding of who we are, how we present ourselves to others, and how others interpret the various self-expressions, gestures, and communications that we put out into the world.

For example, we could consider the case of a woman who has been working hard at a job for many years but who has never received a promotion, even though other, less experienced employees have been promoted. From her point of view, she is hard-working and dedicated, and very professional. Her professionalism is, to her, something that she demonstrates on a regular basis by keeping to herself, engaging in conversation only when necessary and only when it

pertains to work. She has also strictly enforced company policy, never deviating from the already-established rules, and she has ensured that the people who work under her do the same, or else she reprimands them severely so that they will hopefully learn to become more “professional.” As a result, she does not have any friends within the company and is left out of the various gatherings and social events that her colleagues plan. She sees this as a further sign of her professionalism and perceives her co-workers as resenting her efficiency and dedication. Yet, she never seems to receive any reward for her work ethic and she begins to believe that her colleagues are deliberately holding her back out of envy and malice. Finally, one day, a long-time colleague approaches her and, over coffee, explains to her his perception of the situation. From his point of view (and the point of view of others within the company), she comes across as unsociable, more concerned with rules and politics than the human aspect of their work, unable to adapt in the creative and flexible ways that the job demands, and her attitude towards her co-workers makes her come across as self-involved and unsympathetic towards the plights of others. These aspects of her work ethic and work personality have led the higher-level management of the company to believe that she would not be capable of handling a managerial position that would give her more responsibility, more staff working under her, and more interaction with clients. Yet, the company has recognized her dedication and the good work that she does do, so they have been reluctant to let her go. This interpretation of her work personality comes as a complete shock to her. However, she is able to see how her behaviours and actions may have conveyed such a message. She begins to think that, had someone only shared their perspective with her sooner, perhaps things would have played out differently, and she grows to feel ashamed of some of her previous beliefs, decisions, and actions. Thus, instead of rejecting her co-worker’s perspective or letting his perspective get her down and prevent her from growing, she chooses to use the information she has gained to transform herself and her attitude towards work. As a result, she finds that she is not only able to do a better job at work, but that she is also forming more meaningful relationships with her co-workers and gaining more enjoyment and satisfaction from her work. She begins to communicate with more of her colleagues to further expand her self-perspective and continues to grow until she truly excels at her job and finally receives a promotion and acknowledgement of her radical transformation from her superiors.

We can, of course, learn from others *factual* things about the world, like where certain countries are located, who is running for presidency, or how our legal system works. Coming to learn such things can certainly change our experience of the world, but it is primarily through first-order, *authentic* speech that we experience the most significant changes in our perspective. Through first-order speech and the re-orienting of our perspectives, we are granted new ways of experiencing the world, new ways of relating, and new ways of creating or finding meaning. This is what we have seen happen in the example above. The woman in this example was working a job where she was surrounded by people with perspectives on her, but because she never made the effort to access these others' perspectives, she was unable to advance or grow as a person. She was restricted by the limitation of her own self-perspective and her interpretation of the events that were unfolding around her, and it was only by engaging in authentic dialogue with another person that she could overcome her limited view of herself and the world, and ultimately transcend her current situation.

Thus, to conclude, our library of second-order language provides us with the equipment we need to discover first-order speech. We possess the power to take the words and thoughts that we already have and to combine them in new ways that open us up to entirely new thoughts. Yet, speech is inherently interpersonal. Speech is one of the most convenient ways that we possess of sharing complex thoughts with others, and it is the means through which we can share our *world* with other people. By sharing our perspective with others and inhabiting their perspectives through the reciprocity of successful communication, we are able to transcend both second-order language and the thoughts that we could have arrived at on our own. It is the case that we most often remain within the realm of constituted, second-order language and, by doing so, limit ourselves (p. 194). If we truly wish to surpass our current limitations, then one of the most convenient and rich ways that we have of doing so is by engaging in open dialogue with others.

Thus, Merleau-Ponty demonstrates to us both the intersubjective nature of communication and language, as well its fundamental ambiguity—there is a constituted language, but the nature of language is also to transcend itself to become something new. Communication is the primary means that we have of bridging the gap between self and other—between our own, limited perspective and the unique perspective of the other. As we saw in the previous chapter, the subjectivity and agency of others has the potential effect of taking both the world and our selves away from us; the other has his own perspectives and opinions about the

world that we inhabit and about who I am. Yet, who we are for the other is a mysterious secret that the other can choose to share with us, thus giving us back to ourselves, or something that he can forever withhold from us. The way in which we belong to others—the way in which our very self-identity is determined and possessed by other people—is what is identified when we speak of our *being-for-others*, and it is the case that who we are for others can be in contradiction with who we are for ourselves. There thus exists a tension between our being-for-self and being-for-others that is inherent to our being and our experience as human subjects. The primary means that we have of addressing or resolving this tension is the power of *communication* and the cultural tool of *language*, more specifically. It is through authentic, first-order communications with others that we can create and establish new meaning, and come to see ourselves, the world, and others in new ways, and become capable of transcending out current situations and limitations.

1.2 Part Two: The Intersubjective Nature of Human Self-Development

This portion of Chapter One intends to build on what we have learned so far about the intersubjective nature of all experience, which includes our experience of other people and the self, and our communicative interactions. This chapter will examine the role of others (as well as the factors mentioned above) throughout early self-development, from infancy through to adolescence. Special attention will be paid to the *family* as the initial and primary source of self-creation that we experience in the course of our development (a more detailed discussion of the function of the family system in childhood self-development is found in the Appendix to this project). Part II will examine the following stages of self-development: (1) the self as unified with the “mother” (i.e. primary caregiver); (2) the self as separating from the mother; (3) the self as an individual unit actively created and influenced by others; (4) the self as experiencing a gradual realization of agency and the true nature of subjectivity and reality; and (5) the self as experiencing adolescence.

Section II: The Role of Others in Self-Development from Infancy through Adolescence

This section will outline a rough sketch of the process of early self-development from infancy through adolescence, focusing on the role that other people play in the creation and formation of individual identity. To help us see more clearly the relationships between other people and the development of our own identity, the process of early self-development will be broken down into five stages: (1) the self as unified with the mother; (2) the self as separating from the mother; (3) the self as an individual unit beginning to experience the tension between being-for-self and being-for-others; (4) the self as coming to realize and understand the agency and subjectivity of the self and others; and (5) the self as experiencing the process or *crisis* of adolescence. We have examined the more general milieu of intersubjectivity from within which we live our lives through our exploration of the experience of others, communication, the nature of our freedom, and the role of the family in shaping human identity; we have seen how all human experience is inherently and necessarily intersubjective in nature. Gaining a clearer and richer understanding of the role that other people play in self-development, and how our development of the capacity for play is itself largely reliant on others, will further help set the stage for a more in-depth discussion of the phenomenon of play and our examination of the role that play has in early self-development and in self-transformation in adulthood.

The self as indistinct from the mother (“illusion”). The influence of others on our personal identity is visible from the earliest moments of our infancy. When we are first born, we are born into the care of a particular caregiver or caregivers. Whether they are our biological parents or not, these are the people who are most responsible for our care and well-being and with whom we spend the majority of our time with. As such, these are the people who first define and give meaning to the self, the immediate environment, and the world. It is fairly common that a newborn child will take to one parent more than the other, and the favoured parent is usually the one who spends the most (intimate) time with the infant. Traditionally, this was the mother. D.W. Winnicott presents an account of infant identity in his book *Playing and Reality* (1971). Having developed his theories as early as the 1950’s, Winnicott most often uses the term “mother” to refer to the primary caregiver of the infant, himself acknowledging that the “mother” need not be biologically related or even female, and that the “mother” is, simply, the infant’s primary caregiver. Thus, though his original terms will be preserved in recounting his

theory, the term “mother” should be taken to mean “the primary caregiver of the infant,” regardless of biological relation, sex, gender, or any other differentiating factors.

The infant’s earliest identity is *merged* with that of the mother; the infant does not understand himself as separate from her, nor does he recognize the mother as possessing her own, enclosed, personal being and identity. For the infant in the earliest stages of infancy, the mother *is* his own self (Winnicott, 1971, Ch.8). That the infant’s own self is first inseparable from the mother is largely a result of the mother’s efficient adaptability to the infant’s needs. When he is hungry she appears before him with milk (whether by breast or bottle), when he has a bowel movement, he finds himself cleaned just in time, and when he cries out in frustration or discomfort she is there to comfort him. This immediate satisfaction of the infant’s needs and desires gives him a sense of control over his environment and his mother that allows for the *illusion of omnipotence* (Winnicott, 1971, p. 15). In other words, from the infant’s point of view the objective environment is something that exists *for him* and that is entirely under his control, and the mother is seen as a mere piece of or as constituting the environment that is under the infant’s control. Of course, as we will see, the infant’s successful development and maintenance of this *illusion* that constitutes his existence for a short while is dependent on having an adequate parent that is capable of meeting his needs. Thus, the first stage of the infant’s self-development finds him with a self that is, from his point of view, indistinguishable from his mother; the infant *is the mother*, and the mother *is the infant*.

The self as separating from the mother (“disillusionment”). Eventually, however, maternal adaptation to the infant’s needs begins to decrease. The mother begins to let the infant cry for a longer period of time before rushing to his aid, will make him wait longer between feedings, and will pick him up less frequently. This decrease in adaptation occurs in response to infant’s increasing ability (and need) to handle maternal failure; the infant’s needs and capabilities change as he matures, and, in recognition of this, the mother’s treatment of him changes as well. As the mother begins to gradually adapt less and less to the infant’s needs, the infant is forced to gradually learn to separate himself from the mother and to begin to take on a separate existence. The infant *must* go through the process of separation from the mother (as maternal adaption decreases) to come to recognize himself as an independent subjectivity and to develop an accurate understanding of reality (p. 144). Winnicott (1971) says:

The bare statement is this: in the early stages of emotional development of the human infant a vital part is played by the environment which is in fact not yet separated off from the infant by the infant. Gradually the separating-off of the not-me from the me takes place, and the pace varies according to the infant and according to the environment. The major changes take place in the separating-out of the mother as an objectively perceived environmental feature. (p. 150)

The infant's illusion of having magical, omnipotent control over his environment, which includes the mother, must come to an end. The parent must allow the child to become *disillusioned*, gradually experiencing the disconnect of the "me" from the "not-me," and the inner reality from the external reality. This is the process that Winnicott calls *weaning* (p. 17).

As the infant experiences this disillusionment (through the process of weaning) he will, more often than not, develop and make use of *transitional phenomena* (Winnicott, 1971, Ch. 5). Such transitional phenomena exist to fill the developing space between the infant and the mother. This process of coming to realize that the mother is distinct from the self (and that the infant does not have total control over the world) causes the infant a great deal of *anxiety* and *psychological distress*. The transitional object serves as a way of coping with the distress caused by this separation and provides the infant with a great deal of comfort. Initially, the infant and mother existed as a single, unified identity. However, the infant is now coming to perceive and feel the metaphorical "distance" between his own existence and his mother's. For the infant, this is frustrating, distressing, upsetting, and frightening. Thus, the child attempts to bridge or fill the emerging gap between himself and the mother with transitional phenomena, bringing him a temporary sense of comfort.

In infants, transitional phenomena often take the form of a *transitional object*, such as a teddy bear, doll, or blanket (think of the term "security blanket") (Ch. 5). The weaning process and the taking up of a transitional object usually occur at between four and twelve months, depending on the individual, and reliance on the transitional object can persist into childhood (p. 6). Starting in infancy, the transitional object is usually most significant to the child in times of crisis, anxiety, discomfort, and despair. The transitional object is also especially important at bedtime, when it is used as a "soother" that aids the child in falling asleep (p. 5). While many do, some infants do not develop a transitional object. Instead, the primary parent or caregiver will take the place of a proper transitional object, or the typical sequence of development is otherwise broken (Winnicott, 1971, p. 6).

This process of disillusionment and weaning is *critical* to the infant's ability to transition from living under the sole control of the pleasure principle to grasping the *reality principle*. Developing an adequate reality principle is necessary to having an accurate and realistic understanding of the distinction between external, objective reality, and the internal, subjective reality of the individual, and of understanding the relationship between these realities. The strength of an individual's reality principle falls somewhere along a continuum with the near-absence of the reality principle at one end of the spectrum and an overly-strong reality principle at the other end. Having an overly-weak reality principle can lead to an excess of fantasy, an inaccurate understanding of reality and the individual's relationship to reality, unrealistic expectations of the world and others, poor impulse control, and difficulty forming and maintaining healthy relationships. Having a reality principle that is too strong or dominant, on the other hand, can lead to a high degree of conformity and the absence of creative activity, a reluctance or inability to take risks or engage in healthy play, and a lack of sense of fulfilment and meaning in one's life.

This transition from living under the control of the pleasure principle to the successful grasping of the reality principle, and the whole illusion-disillusionment process of weaning more generally, cannot be made successfully unless the infant has a *good-enough 'mother'* (p. 13). What it means for a parent to be a "good-enough mother" is that she must initially be entirely devoted to her child, allowing the achievement of illusion in the infant before gradually adapting less and less completely "according to the infant's growing ability to deal with her failure" (p. 14). For the infant to successfully pass from a state of illusion through the process of disillusionment the parent must first be almost one-hundred percent adaptive, allowing the infant a sense of omnipotence, before gradually bringing the infant's experience in line with reality (p. 15). Illusion is ultimately achieved by the mother's "near-perfect" adaptation to the infant's needs, while disillusionment is accomplished through the gradual cessation of this adaptation, allowing room for frustration and error that the infant must, and now has the potential to tolerate. What we mean by "weaning," then, is not (merely) the gradual cessation of the breast- or bottle-feeding of the infant, but precisely this gradual *disillusionment* of the infant as the mother becomes less adaptive to his needs in accordance with his growing potential for tolerating and learning from her absence. Winnicott stresses that: "If illusion-disillusionment has gone astray

the infant cannot get to so normal a thing as weaning [...]. The mere termination of breast-feeding is not a weaning.” (p. 17)

The transitional object is then founded as a replacement for the illusion of control over the world and the mother that the infant is losing, serving as a source of comfort (p. 17). Usually a blanket, doll, or stuffed animal, the transitional object is the infant’s first “not-me” object; the first instance of recognition of an object as distinct and separate from the self. Yet, the transitional object is transitional not only in the sense that it comes into being during the infant’s transition through the illusion-disillusionment process, but also because it exists in the transitional space opened up through the separation of the infant’s own identity from the mother and the environment.

The transitional space, says Winnicott, exists somewhere *between* the internal and the external realms of experiencing. Transitional objects and transitional phenomena designate the “intermediate area of experience between the thumb and the teddy bear, between oral eroticism and the true object-relationship” (p. 3). Thus, the transitional object is neither fully recognized as being part of the infant’s own body or self, but nor is it recognized as wholly external to the infant. From the infant’s point of view the transitional object is neither a mental concept nor an external object. The transitional object ultimately symbolizes the loosening of the union between infant and mother, and the development of a distinction between the inner and outer realities, and is located in the transitional space between the mother being seen by the infant as part of the infant, and the mother being experienced as an independent object. The transitional object represents the harmonious union of two objects (i.e. the infant and the mother) that are now becoming separate (Winnicott, 1971, Ch.7).

When we think of what it means to be an individual it is not difficult to arrive at recognition of the fact that we typically take ourselves to be *dual* beings—that there is a dual aspect to our experience of the world and of the self. This is something that we identified in our examination of the role of the family in identity formation. Insofar as we are thinking, feeling beings, we have an experience of an internal, *inner world* comprised of mental concepts, thoughts, beliefs, and feelings. Insofar as we are embodied, perceptual beings, we have an experience of an external, *outer world* in which we participate and represent ourselves through

our actions and behaviours.² However, Winnicott argues that there is more to our experience than the two components of ‘inner’ and ‘outer,’ or ‘self’ and ‘other’; there is another aspect of our experience and our existence that we must acknowledge. Winnicott says:

Of every individual who has reached the stage of being a unit with a limiting membrane and an outside and an inside, it can be said that there is an inner reality to that individual, an inner world that can be rich or poor and can be at peace or in a state of war... [But] if there is a need for this double statement [i.e. that our experience is twofold, comprised of an ‘inside’ and an ‘outside’], there is also need for a triple one: the third part of the life of a human being, a part that we cannot ignore, is an intermediate area of experiencing, to which inner reality and external life both contribute... I am here staking a claim for an intermediate state between a baby’s inability and his growing ability to recognize and accept reality. (p. 3)

Thus, Winnicott argues that we must recognize a third dimension of our experience that is neither internal nor external, and that exists somewhere in between the two. This is what he calls the “intermediate area of experiencing” and this is the *transitional space* in which the transitional object exists for the infant. All transitional phenomena exist between subjective experience and objective perception, and our experience of these phenomena begins at the time when we, as infants, first begin to weed out our own identity from our mother’s identity and the environment that surrounds us.

However, Winnicott (1971) also claims that the separation of the infant from the mother—the *me* from the *not-me*—is never fully achieved. Rather, there exists a constant threat of separation that is never actually fulfilled. The reason why this separation remains a mere threat is because we manage to avoid achieving separation by constantly filling in the space made by the beginning of the separation with “creative playing, with the use of symbols, and with all that eventually adds up to cultural life” (p. 147). The weaning process calls us out of our peaceful self-same existence with the mother and brings to our attention for the first time the internal-external divide, the tension between the subjective and the objective, the lack of control that the *me* has over the *not-me*. Thus, as soon as the gap begins to form, we begin to fill it. Winnicott explains:

² Of course, we also noted that these aspects of our existence are not as distinct as they appear to be on first glance; it is actually the case that our ‘inner’ experience is always shaped by our ‘outer’ experience—by our being-for-others—and that this is what it means to be an intersubjective being. We are distinct individuals, but our experience of ourselves and the world is always shaped by others.

It is assumed here that the task of reality-acceptance is never completed, that no human being is free from the strain of relating inner and outer reality, and that relief from this strain is provided by an intermediate area of experience... which is not challenged (arts, religion, etc.). This intermediate area is in direct continuity with the play area of the small child who is 'lost' in play. In infancy this intermediate area is necessary for the initiation of a relationship between the child and the world... (p. 18)

What Winnicott is getting at is that the transitional area of experience (and the transitional object) is representative of a space where the question of the distinction between subjectivity and objectivity is left alone, and where the strain of objective perception is left behind (p. 18). The transitional area of experiencing is, essentially, the point of union of our inner and outer realities, or the point of their dissolution.

In the transitional area, the internal and external, self and other, are blended together in such a way that the importance of their distinction is temporarily *dissolved* or "put on hold," so to speak. The transitional area is a space from within which we can feel ourselves as temporarily (re-)united with the other in a peaceful co-existence similar to that of childhood; it is an area in which we temporarily cease to experience the distinction between our own perspective and the perspective of the other, or where the notion of perspectives becomes altogether unimportant. However, we never truly destroy the distinction between self and other, and, as soon as the experience is over or we are called out of it, we find this dual reality waiting for us right where we left it. We never actually escape our own subjectivity and the world never ceases to have the objective quality that allows it to be shared by countless subjects.

Winnicott (1971) claims that the transitional area of experience includes human activities such as art, religion, and culture. In art, religion, and culture, individuals are able to enjoy a realm of overlapping, common experience, just as the child who is at play with his friends can do so. Even if it is implicitly understood by the people engaging in these shared activities that each person is in fact a unique subjectivity, that subjectivity is simultaneously left behind and overridden by the common ground established by shared beliefs and communal projects (p. 18). Essentially, then, Winnicott's "transitional area" identifies the same (or a similar) phenomenon to Merleau-Ponty's notion of the "being-shared-by-two" that is achieved through linguistic communication. It could even be said that the dissolution of perspectives that individuals experience while caught up in transitional phenomena *is* the experience of being-shared-by-two.

Because this third area of experience is where play and culture take place, it is critical to the child's healthy development that he is able to participate in this third area of experience. As

we noted, the child's capacity to experience the realm of transitional phenomena, such as play and culture, is dependent on his mother's ability to be "good-enough." If the mother is not capable of meeting the infant's needs adequately, as in cases where the infant is deprived or neglected, or if the mother meets the infant's needs too perfectly, failing to allow the weaning process to take place, the infant will not become capable of creative, healthy play³ (Ch. 7). Because of a failure of parental dependability and a resulting lack of trust in the parent, children who are deprived of the proper illusion-disillusionment process become unable to use objects creatively, or will fill the transitional space with their own imaginative creations or allow it to be filled by someone else (Ch. 7). The filling of the transitional space with personal fantasy-content prevents the child from fully being able to experience the intersubjective and interpersonal nature of the transitional realm of experience. As Winnicott says, the intermediate area is, for a child, a way of first connecting with the world, which includes other people. Play, religion, art, and culture are all necessarily intersubjective projects and ways of relating with the world. It is largely through these mechanisms, and especially through early childhood experiences of play, that we learn how to connect and interact with other people and develop the social skills that are necessary for building meaningful relationships with other and becoming socially adaptive.

The next example that Winnicott (1971) uses to demonstrate the role that the family—and, in particular, our caregiver—plays in the self-development of the infant is that of *facial mirroring*. Adequate mirroring is an important part of what determines if a mother is "good-enough" or not. Winnicott makes the claim that: "In individual emotional development the precursor of the mirror is the mother's face" (p. 149). What he means by this is that, at the beginning of life, what the infant sees when he looks at his mother's face is *himself* (p.151). Because the infant does not have a full understanding of his subjectivity or of the subjectivity of others, the infant does not understand himself as separate from his mother (Ch.9). What this means is that, prior to an understanding of linguistic concepts and communication, the mother's face is the first experience that the baby has of the self being reflected back; it is his first experience of someone else revealing to him *what he is*.

³ It is the ability to engage in a certain kind of play or way of playing that is especially compromised when the child does not have a healthy and successful experience of separation of the self from the mother. Such distinctions between play types will be made and explained in the following section on play.

Fortunately, for many babies, most of the time, the mother actually does reflect the infant back to himself (except, of course, every now and again when she is preoccupied or unable to respond) (Winnicott, 1971, p. 151). In adequate or successful facial mirroring, when the infant is feeling aware and engaged he calls out and sees a face reflected back to him that is also aware and engaged, and when he coos in pleasure and smiles, he looks up to see a face smiling back at him, etc. The process of successful parent-child mirroring is typically similar to the following example: (1) mother looks at baby, (2) mother sees that baby is happy, (3) mother smiles at baby, (4) baby sees mother's smile and experiences it as his own. In other words, the infant's own happiness or joy is reflected back to him and this makes it *real*—the mother *gives the infant's happiness to him*. In this instance, the mother is paying attention to the infant and reflecting back to the infant a relevant, appropriate facial response. What is occurring between the mother and infant in successful facial mirroring, then, is what Laing calls *confirmation*; the mother is confirming her infant's sense of what is real and his budding perception of who he is.

What is happening in the mother-infant mirroring process, says Winnicott, is that “the mother is looking at the baby and what she looks like is related to what she sees there” (p. 151). This formulation is particularly important. Winnicott has here chosen his words carefully and, instead of saying that what the mother looks like is related to what is *actually* there, he ensures that he captures the subjective nature of the mother's perception. What the mother sees when she looks at the infant is coloured by more than what is actually present in the infant; her emotional (and, therefore, facial) response to the infant is influenced by her own emotions, mood, psychological and physiological state, attachment style, ability to express affection and be intimate, how she feels about the infant and about being a mother, and how she feels about other relationships that are relevant to her own life. In other words, in cases where the mother is preoccupied by any one (or more) of these things, what the mother sees when she looks at the infant is *herself*.

In cases where the mother sees herself and her own emotional state in the infant, she reflects back to the infant a face that does not match his own; whatever image the infant has projected is not returned to him. Such cases are cases of *failed* facial mirroring, and are akin to what Laing calls *disconfirmation*. When the mother fails to reflect back to the infant a genuine representation of himself, she is disconfirming his sense of reality and his experience of who he

is. What the infant sees when he looks at his mother is not himself—not the person he takes himself to be.

Thus, Winnicott says that we must ask what the infant sees and experiences in instances where the mother is not reflecting the infant back to himself. He says:

I am asking that this which is naturally done well by mothers who are caring for their babies shall not be taken for granted. I can make my point by going straight over to the case of the baby whose mother reflects her own mood or, worse still, the rigidity of her own defences. In such a case what does the baby see? (p. 151)

What happens to the infant who does not have the proper experience of the self being reflected back to him? What happens when an infant's mother is always indifferent, looking away, ignoring the infant, or preoccupied with her own moods? Winnicott answers this with two likely consequences of such parental behaviour: (1) the infant's creative capacity will begin to diminish or atrophy, and he will usually begin to turn to his environment in search of some other source of self-reflection, so that he may get something of himself given back to him, no matter how small. (2) The other possible consequence is that the infant will get used to this state of affairs and will come to expect that, when he looks at the mother, all that he will see is the mother's face (Ch. 9). In other words, the baby accepts that he only sees the mother's face (and not his own). What this means, says Winnicott, is that "perception takes the place of that which might have been the beginning of a significant exchange with the world, a two-way process in which self-enrichment alternates with the discovery of meaning in the world of seen things" (p. 151). Speaking in Laing's terms, the infant's sense of reality is overridden or disregarded by his mother's; his own sense of who he is becomes disconfirmed and replaced by his mother's interpretation of his identity or else it is ignored altogether. The infant who is disconfirmed in this way does not have the experience of having himself reflected back to him as he takes himself to be, and, if he never has the experience of seeing himself out in the world (through his mother), then he may not experience himself as fully real.

Winnicott does note, however, that these are not firm, guaranteed consequences. He reminds us that these consequences can happen to varying degrees in different individuals, and that some infants may begin to experience negative consequences without giving up hope of finding themselves in the mother's face. Regardless, in cases where the mother consistently fails to mirror with the infant adequately, the infant is likely to experience some negative

consequences. At the very least, a mother who is inadequate in this sense complicates things and makes healthy development more difficult for the infant.

At the time that the use of actual mirrors begins, children have already come to recognize themselves as separate from the mother and facial mirroring between parent and child has decreased. Winnicott goes on to conclude from this infantile experience of mother-infant mirroring that our first use of actual mirrors serves to reassure us of the continuity of the mother-image—that we turn to the mirror first as an attempt to re-assure ourselves that our mothers are still there, paying attention. This use of the mirror, claims Winnicott, precedes its more commonly-recognized use as a way of appeasing (or confirming) our concerns over personal beauty, an interest in aesthetics, and a preoccupation with love.

A healthy relation to mirrors and a proper understanding of what they can/should be used for is dependent upon the successful mirroring of the mother. One possible unhealthy relationship that we can develop with mirrors is when we constantly rely on them and turn to them for approval and recognition (Ch. 9). This type of behaviour can stem from an inadequate mirroring-experience with the mother where the infant is constantly faced with the task of tending to his mother's own emotional needs or uncertainty about her appearance (p. 153). This can happen in cases where the mother constantly looks at the infant with negative expressions (e.g. sadness, anger, disgust), or any case where the mother's expression suggests that she does not truly see the infant (as when ignoring the infant or in cases where she is preoccupied with her own emotions).

Winnicott (1971) presents, as an example of this, the case of a woman who awoke every morning feeling overwhelmingly depressed and who could only escape these feelings of depression and start to feel better after completing her morning rituals and “putting on her face” (p. 153). Winnicott explains that, “What is illustrated by this case only exaggerates that which is normal. The exaggeration is of the task of getting the mirror to notice and approve” (p. 153). In other words, because this woman never received the proper recognition and acknowledgment from her mother that would have allowed her to feel “seen,” she spent the rest of her life trying to substitute her own recognition (but distanced from herself as though it were coming from someone else via use of the mirror) for this maternal-recognition that was so absent in her childhood.

In keeping with Laing's notion of ontological security, Winnicott (1971) goes on to explain how being seen, especially as an infant, is a large part of what makes us *feel real*, and how feeling real is a critical part of human identity. To explain what he means and to further reveal the importance of the mother's face as a mirror in early childhood, he compares (psycho)therapy to parental mirroring:

Psychotherapy is... a long-term giving the patient back what the patient brings. It is a complex derivative of the face that reflects what is there to be seen. I like to think of my work this way, and to think that if I do this well enough the patient will find his or her own self, and will be able to exist and to feel real. Feeling real is more than existing; it is finding a way to exist as oneself, and to relate to objects as oneself, and to have a self into which to retreat for relaxation.”
(Winnicott, 1971, p.158)

In other words, having the self reflected back through the mother's face is both the infant's first experience of *being seen* and of *feeling real*. What it means to feel real is to experience oneself as having a unique, personal identity that is stable, functional, and adequate, and that is “seen,” *acknowledged*, or *confirmed* by others. The recognition of the child's individual reality as separate from the mother and as adequate allows the child to feel himself as real, independent, and capable of relating to and interacting with a world that also experiences his reality. When the mother fails to give this experience to the child and offsets his healthy self-development, there are likely to be undesirable consequences and complications for the child, such as over-reliance on the confirmation and acknowledgment of others, and an unstable identity or one that is too dependent on the perspectives of others. However, therapy offers something of a re-creation of this early situation and has the potential to satisfy the long-term desire to be acknowledged for who we are—to be seen.

As we learned in the earlier section on *communication*, others have the power to help us come to learn things about ourselves that we could never have come to know otherwise, and they can help us transform our situations and our sense of self by interacting with us in these intimate ways. The mother-infant mirroring phenomenon is one of the earliest forms of subject-to-subject communication and self-discovery through others that we experience. Because of this, as Winnicott points out, failed mother-infant mirroring can complicate or confuse our ability to communicate effectively with others or the ways in which we communicate with them, and can also have a detrimental effect on our ability to develop a healthy, stable sense of self.

Thus, to conclude our analysis of Winnicott's explanation of infantile identity, we can see that the first role that others play in shaping our identity is a powerful and critical one. Initially, the infant has no separate identity; he does not experience himself as a distinct and separate entity. Gradually, however, as the mother becomes increasingly less adaptive towards the infant's needs (in accordance with his growing potential to handle her potential) and the infant begins to experience a failure of the environment to meet his needs, the infant becomes aware of himself as somehow distinct from his mother and his environment, and he begins to develop the self-other structure that all individuals must necessarily have. However, Winnicott has also demonstrated that there is a third aspect to experience and, thus, to personal identity: the realm of *transitional phenomena* or the *intermediate area of experiencing*. This third dimension to our experience is neither wholly internal or subjective, nor external and objective. It rests somewhere between the two and it is the realm in which we experience the phenomena of play, art, religion, and human culture. For the infant to become capable of experiencing this area and being able to play, the mother figure must be a "good-enough mother." The mother must initially meet the infant's needs with such accuracy that the infant is able to experience the illusion of having a magical, omnipotent control over the world. Next, the mother must allow the infant to gradually be disillusioned (a process which usually accompanies a decrease in breast-feeding), weaning him off of her and allowing him to discover the "me" and the "not-me."

When our parents succeed in being good-enough and helping us complete the process of illusion-disillusionment, we are most often able to develop "properly"—in the healthiest way possible. We become capable of the creative use of objects and creativity more generally, we are capable of playing and experiencing the transitional realm that will later allow us to fully appreciate, experience, and participate in cultural activities, we develop a sense of the self as distinct and unique, and we achieve an understanding of the reality principle (i.e. we are able to move out of a state of living according to the satisfaction of immediate needs and personal fantasy, and to live according to the shared world of reality that all humans participate in). On the other hand, if our parents fail us in the state of illusion or disillusionment (or in both), by being neglectful or too adaptive, there is a much greater chance that we will not achieve healthy development and that we will become incapable of fully achieving the aforementioned qualities.

Another example of the role that others play in shaping the identity of the infant is in parental-mirroring. The face of the mother is the first "mirror" that we encounter; it is the first

instance of having ourselves reflected back to us—of being given back to ourselves—that we have. In cases where the mother is attentive and caring and reflects the infant back to himself adequately, the infant is able to establish a creative and enriching rapport between himself and the world; he feels himself as seen and acknowledged—as having a presence in the world, and he can come to accept himself as a real, meaningful individual who is no longer dependent on the recognition of his mother to feel his reality. On the other hand, when the mother consistently fails to reflect the infant back to himself, and especially in cases where she ignores the infant or only reflects back to him her own moods, then the infant’s development may be thrown off-course, he may lose his creative potential, and he may develop an unhealthy relationship to mirrors (i.e. to *being seen*) as well as an unhealthy dependence on the recognition of others in order to feel himself as real.

The self as an individual unit. Once we have successfully separated ourselves from the mother during infancy (i.e. at around 12-18 months), we gradually begin to realize and accept our status as individual “units.” This is to say that we achieve the first stage of recognition of the self-other distinction, coming to experience ourselves as unique individuals. As individuals, we gradually begin to develop our own tastes and preferences, likes and dislikes, beliefs, desires, and opinions, etcetera. However, we are, during these early stages of childhood, still under the control of a family system that is intended to shape our beliefs and attitudes about the world, others, and even ourselves. During early childhood we understand that we are individuals, but we also still have a very profound sense of *belonging* to a certain family whose norms, conventions, rules, transactional patterns, and beliefs we must adhere to in order to fit in and “survive” within the family unit. However, we do not yet understand that our family has its own, unique perspective and way of doing things, and that what is ‘normal’ for our family may not be in someone else’s. That is, while we understand ourselves as distinct from other people and of being in possession of an inner world that we have special access to, we do not yet have a fully developed understanding of our *agency* and our *subjectivity*, and of the agency and subjectivity of others.

In *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (1976) Simone de Beauvoir explains that the child is born into a world that appears to be an already-established, meaningful universe that she did not help create. The human world is an *adult world* that is not geared towards the child’s tastes or

interests, and it appears to the child as absolute in its being—as fully-defined, determinate, and universally-perceived (p. 35). Because of the apparent absolute reality of this world and the child’s own lack of awareness and understanding, the child initially experiences the world and the views of the adults that fill her life as something that she must *obey* (p. 35). The child takes all values, words, culture and custom, the proper use of objects, and the inventions around him as given *facts*, as the indisputable *truth* about the world and the way that things actually are (p. 35). To the child, these values and norms are as real, true, concrete, and unchangeable as the earth that he walks on and the trees in the park that he plays at each day. They appear to the child as objects of reality that cannot be contested (p. 35). The “real world” is, to the child, the world that adults occupy and that the child can only bear silent witness to. Beauvoir says that “Rewards, prizes, words of praise or blame instill in [the child] the orientation that there exist a good and an evil which like the sun and the moon exist as ends in themselves” (p. 36). The child is taught that there exist a good and an evil, he is told which thoughts, beliefs, and acts are good and which are evil, and these things are taught to him as facts of reality that are not to be—that *cannot* be—contested by him. The real world is the world of adults, culture, custom, politics, and value, and all that the child can do—the child’s right and proper role—is to only “respect and obey” (p. 35). The child, at least initially, *accepts the world that is given to him*.

Furthermore, just as the child believes in the concrete reality of values and norms, the child also believes in the being of parents and teachers as they appear to him. The child accepts the performances that adults put on, the various “masks” that they wear, and the stories that they tell about themselves, the world, and the child as firm, immutable realities (p. 36). In the eyes of the child adults really *are* the absolute authorities and “divinities” that they pretend to be. Even though certain adults may not wear such masks or claim to be god-like, the child nevertheless perceives them as such. The teacher who says that he is righteous and mighty and infallible is taken to be so (p. 36) Thus, the child, in a state of relative ignorance, takes for granted the world as “definite and substantial” and, as a result, also thinks that his own being is definite and substantial in much the same way—he believes that the world and all that exists is fully determined and unchangeable, and that he, as part of the pre-determined world of adults, is himself fully determinate and defined (p. 36). Beauvoir says:

He is a good little boy or a scamp; he enjoys being it. If something deep inside him belies this conviction, he conceals this imperfection. He consoles himself for an inconsistency which he

attributes to his young age by pinning his hopes on the future. Later on he too will become a big, imposing statue. While waiting, he plays at being, at being a saint, a hero, a guttersnipe. He feels himself like those models whose images are sketched out in his books in broad, unequivocal strokes; explorer, brigand, sister of charity... (p. 36)

What Beauvoir explains here is the way in which the child initially takes for granted the reality of the beliefs and assessments about his character, just as he does what he is taught about the world. The adults in the child's life are always teaching him—telling him and deciding for him—who he is, what he is, and who will be or should be when he “grows up.” The child *is what he is told he is*. He is a good boy or a bad boy, a talented boy or an untalented boy, someone destined for great things or destined for mediocrity. Even when the child is not explicitly told what he is or ought to be, he nevertheless assumes that the praise and blame that he receives are statements about his being and takes them to heart. Thus, during this third stage of our self-development other people play an especially large role in creating the child's sense of self, though the child still participates in his own self-creation through acts of play and other forms of exploration and discovery.

The self is not, in fact, something that is predetermined or given to us, or that exists somewhere, fully-formed and fully-constituted, waiting to be found by us. Rather, the self is something that is *created*, actively, over time, and that *develops* (more passively) as a result of our experiences of and interactions with the world around us. Yet, we ultimately play a very significant role in determining who we are and who we will become—*we can ultimately create ourselves*. However, self-creation is always an *intersubjective* or *interpersonal* project, and at this stage in our development we do not yet fully realize or understand these things. As children, we do not yet fully understand that the self is not, in fact, something that ought to be determined by our parents or God, or bound by fate; we have not realized that the self is indeterminate and ambiguous and open to our active efforts to shape and inform it, and that we can, therefore, take the reins and take control of our own self-creation. Of course, because others will always play a role in shaping who we are, we can never be completely in control of our self-creation. This does not mean, however, that we cannot take a predominantly active stance and dedicate ourselves to the project of self-creation.

The child, however, is not yet in a position where his actions have a significant impact on the world; the child's decisions do not contribute to his own self-creation and the transformation of his situation in the same way or to the same extent as the decisions of adults. Thus, while the

child may not have the power and authority to actually make it the case that x or become x in his day-to-day living, the child is instead able to *play at being x*. His own existence is not bound by the same constraints of the adult or plagued by the realities of human freedom. Because of this, the child can play and live a “free” existence that is always somewhat separate and removed from the “real world” of adults and values. It is because of this sense of separation between himself and the real world that the child feels as though he can “passionately pursue and joyfully attain goals which he has set for himself,” all without experiencing the stress and pressure that comes with the experience of freedom as it really is (p. 35). Being a genuinely free subjectivity means being *responsible*—being held accountable for—all of one’s decisions and the consequences of those decisions. The recognition and acceptance of the full extent of one’s freedom is the taking on of an overwhelming responsibility; it is the act of taking responsibility for one’s existence, for one’s own identity, and the life that one creates for oneself. Being free and responsible for oneself is exhausting; in a very important way, freedom is a burden.

The reason that the child is able to not be burdened by his own freedom, and enjoy such tranquility in early childhood is because he is not yet fully aware of his own subjectivity; he does not yet possess full knowledge of the subjectivity of others or of the difference in perspectives that exists between individuals. His actions simply do not carry the same weight as those of adults, and this is something of which he is most aware (p. 36). Because of this the child is typically able to escape the “anguish” of freedom—he is able to be lazy, to act on his whims, and his faults have little consequence. He realizes that his actions and his existence do not “weigh upon the earth” and have a meaningful impact in the way that the actions of adults do (pp. 36-37). As Beauvoir says, the child “feels himself happily irresponsible” (p. 36). The child is, at all times, protected against the realities of his existence by the illusion of a fully determined, pre-existing universe full of value and meaning (p. 36).

Essentially, even though the child has been assigned an identity (or identities) by those around him and even though he plays at committing to adult-like behaviours, his identity is nevertheless rich and diverse. Even if he experiences his own being as fixed and determined when interacting with adults, with other children and in the sacred safety of play he is able to experience himself as undetermined, diverse, and inconsistent. The reason that the child’s identity can be this way is precisely because he has not yet had to assume the freedom and responsibility that comes with adulthood and the recognition of the full extent of one’s

subjectivity. The child is not held down by the weight of the choices that he makes and the notion of long-term consequences. He does not yet realize that he has been born into the role of creator, that he will be (and already is) responsible for deciding what kind of person he will be, and assigning meaning and value to the world. Similarly, he does not yet fully understand the limitations and complications imposed by his embodiment or his temporality. Young children do not possess a realistic sense of planning or commitment; they do not fully grasp what it means to commit to planned projects based on realistic expectations about the future and facts about the present. Because of this, the child is free to daydream about the future in a way that is largely disconnected from reality, and, for a time, to enjoy his freedom from freedom.

The self as realizing the true nature of things. Unfortunately, this peaceful time in the child's life must eventually come to an end. The next stage of development is marked by the contradiction or tension that comes to arise between the child's obedient acceptance of the (apparently) fully-determined, adult-controlled world around him and his growing suspicion that there is something wrong with that world—that things are not what they appear to be, and that much of what he has seen and been taught might be false, uncertain, or distorted by the prejudices of others. Eventually the child will begin to notice the contradictions, hesitations, and weaknesses of adults, and he will realize that "Language, customs, ethics, and values have their source in these uncertain creatures" (p. 39). The contradictions and questions are now too many, and the child can no longer silence his suspicions and obey without question. The child begins to notice the flaws and contradictions that exist in the structure of the ready-made world that he took for granted, and he begins to ask questions. In particular, he begins to ask "Why?" Why do we act this way and not that way? What would happen if we were to act differently? Why must I follow these rules and not others? As these questions bubble up inside of the child it becomes more and more apparent that the world is not what it once appeared to be; it becomes apparent in the disparity between the answers to his questions that he receives, in their failure to satisfy him, in the adults' own uncertainty in relation to the answers that they give.

It is at this time that the child discovers his agency and subjectivity, and realizes the true nature of his *freedom*. At the same time as he discovers his own subjectivity, the child necessarily discovers the subjectivity that other people possess (p. 39). The child realizes that his perspective on the world is one of many, just as the perspective of the other is one of many. The

child comes to realize that the world is *not*, as he once believed, fully determined and absolute, that adults are not divinities, that the perspectives that others have may differ from or challenge his own, and that, like the rest of the world, his identity is not fully determined and there is still room for him to take up his identity and re-shape it. By finally discovering his own agency, creativity, and freedom, the child is finally discovering his potential. The child begins to realize that, just as the world is not clearly or unambiguously what he was told it is and believed it to be, he may not be the person he was taught to be or that he takes himself to be. This discovery is thus a discovery of the world as it actually is, a discovery of others, and a discovery of (radical) possibility—the discovery of possibilities beyond the illusory world of childhood, the discovery that things could be otherwise. In achieving this, he realizes that he, like the adults he once idolized, is *free*—free to choose a life and an identity for himself.

Thus, this stage of our self-development marks the turning point at which our identity is no longer created primarily by others, and at which we finally begin to play a more active role in our self-development—this is the point at which self-development, more so than ever before, begins to involve the project of *self-creation*. This can only happen if we aren't in bad faith about our freedom, and do not allow ourselves to be primarily influenced by others. Now that the child is capable of recognizing the fallibility of his parents, teachers, friends and relatives, and all of broader society, he is able to *challenge* much of what he has been taught. Furthermore, as he gets older, the child gains more and more tangible freedom to engage in self-exploration and self-construction, and to ask and answer questions as he pleases.

The self during adolescence. This discovery of reality is unsettling and, at the same time as the child begins to have these realizations, he is called to be a member of the party that is *responsible*; to join the world of adults who create, uphold, and destroy (p. 39). He comes to realize that his own actions now carry the same weight and have the same impact on the world as those around him. He will now have to make real decisions and commitments, and he will learn what sacrifice is (p. 39). Beauvoir notes that this process of coming to realize one's own freedom and subjectivity is deeply distressing and, in recognition of this, she says that this moment in the child's history "is doubtless the deepest reason for the crisis of adolescence; the individual must at last assume his subjectivity" (p. 39).

Essentially, for Beauvoir, adolescence is the ending—the *destruction*—of the child’s world. Our childhoods are, in a way, *illusions*, and adolescence is, in this sense, the death of that illusion. As young children, we find ourselves living in a world that we are nevertheless separated from; there exist for us *two worlds*: the “real world” of adults, and the carefree, safely-enclosed world that the child inhabits; a world of illusion nested within the real, shared world that cradles all human activity. Here we find an extension of the *disillusionment* that Winnicott talks about in his discussion of infantile development. First, the illusion that we are one with the mother and that we have omnipotent control over our environment is shattered by the infant achieving separation from the mother. Then, the child proceeds through the stages of early development under the illusion that we co-exist peacefully with others in a fully-determined world without individual perspectives. The child experiences the further illusions that adults are divinities, that the self is determined and absolute, and that the child is somehow different from adults (with all their responsibilities and freedom, and their impact on the world). Progression through childhood is the gradual weaning off of this illusory world that we initially inhabit, and entry into adolescence is the final stage in that process. Thus, the disillusionment that Winnicott discusses does not cease at 12-18 months when the infant successfully achieves separation of the self from the mother. Rather, disillusionment is an ongoing process that encompasses much of our childhood and that culminates in the adolescent’s realization that he, like others, is a full, free subject with a unique perspective on the world.

Adolescence is simultaneously a violence and a death, and a *re-birth*. The child (hopefully) “comes out the other end” as a proper subject who understands the nature of his own subjectivity and his freedom. Nevertheless, the plucking from the world of childhood (only to watch it collapse before us) and the insertion into another, unfamiliar world is a heavy, distressing event. Even if our progression into adolescence is gradual, it remains the case that the recognition of our freedom and the responsibility that comes with it is a profound event. Our whole world not only *transforms* during adolescence (usually accompanied by a transformation of the self), but a piece of that world actually *dies*. The world of childhood is lost forever and can never again be retrieved. Even if we attempt to live as children as adults, we do so with the full knowledge that what we are doing is a mere *imitation* of something lost to us forever, and that we are still subject to the same agency and subjectivity as every other individual.

Beauvoir also acknowledges, however, that this collapsing of “the serious world” can also be viewed and experienced as a *deliverance* (p. 39). She says:

Although he was irresponsible, the child also felt himself defenseless before obscure powers which directed the course of things. But whatever the joy of this liberation may be, it is not without great confusion that the adolescent finds himself cast into a world which is no longer ready-made, which has to be made; he is abandoned, unjustified, the prey of a freedom that is no longer chained up by anything. What will he do in the face of this new situation? This is the moment when he decides. (Beauvoir, 1976, p. 39)

While it is uncomfortable, the adolescent process of discovering the nature of subjectivity and freedom is ultimately a deliverance of the child and his being *into his own hands*. It is, however, at the same time the delivering of an entire world into the child’s hands. While he is finally free in the truest sense and can come to understand what he really is, he is simultaneously called upon to decide and declare who he is, and what the world is; he must give value and meaning back to a world that has been stripped of all previous certainty and thrust into his hands. The pre-determined, created world that he has known for so long is now gone, and he suddenly finds himself the master of a new world that must be given life. Certainly, he can choose to fill this barren world with what is most comforting or convenient—to fill it with the content that his family or his teachers taught him—so that he does not have quite so much work to do. However, even this requires that he accept his freedom and he must be the one to make the choice; he must choose between filling this new world with old material to the exclusion of all the possibilities that surround him, and undertaking the potentially-excruciating, burdensome task of answering questions anew and filling up the new world with content as he moves forward.

Unfortunately, however, de Beauvoir notes that not all people reach the level of agency and subjectivity as the true “adult.” There are people who persist throughout their lives in living an infantile existence in which they remain ignorant and slaves to the subjectivity of others. (p. 37). Of these people de Beauvoir says, “Like the child, they can exercise their freedom, but only within this universe which has been set up before them, without them” (p. 37) As examples of people who lead an infantile existence as adults she mentions African American slaves and women. Because the infantile situation of slaves and women (from certain cultures) is something that is imposed on them, de Beauvoir does not see them as responsible for their lack of agency in the same way that she views other adults as responsible (p. 38). She notes that many Western women, however, continue to choose to live under the rule of men. They choose to take up and

attempt to live as reality the perspectives of their lovers, husbands, or fathers. These women, she says, “submit to the laws, the gods, the customs, and the truths created by the males.” (De Beauvoir, 1976, p. 37) Of course, it is not only women who fail to develop into full “adults,” and who choose or consent to living as subservient to some other’s perspective. As we have seen, the process of becoming an adult is unsettling, confusing, and painful, and living as an adult is no easy task. The radical increase in responsibility and the loss of the brand of freedom (i.e. freedom from true, existential freedom) that we experience in childhood can be enough to frighten some people away from completing the transition. However, de Beauvoir notes how difficult it is for the infantile world to persist beyond adolescence. This is because the natural course of childhood development necessitates that we begin to notice the flaws in the structure of the world that we once took to be given and absolute (pp. 38-39). We begin to notice these flaws whether we like it or not, and we can never make those flaws disappear. Similarly, while we can choose to distract ourselves, turn a blind eye, or try to forget, we can never actually destroy our freedom, our agency, and the resulting *responsibility* that we possess. We can *act* as though we are children; we can put on a *performance* in which other people are responsible for us, our decisions, and the content and substance of our worlds, but we cannot actually make it be the case that other people are actually responsible for these things.

Thus, adolescence marks our transition into the side of the spectrum where we are primarily responsible for ourselves and our self-creation. While it is the case that other people never stop playing a part in shaping who we are and who we become, by the time we pass through the adolescent stage of self-development we are free subjectivities who are always, to some extent, responsible for our own actions and decisions, and for our relationships with others and how we handle them. If self-development has proceeded along a healthy course, then this is the time in our lives when we are first able to reflect upon the body of knowledge, norms, and values that has been instilled in us, and to not only *consider* what kind of people we are and would like to become, but to actually *act on* our considerations, goals, and desires. This is to say that adolescence is the first real step towards authentic living and authentic self-creation that we take, and we do this by coming to realize the true nature of human subjectivity and freedom, and by beginning to assume responsibility for own actions. Adolescence, however, is only one step of the journey of self-creation that we live throughout the duration of our lives. Beyond the crisis of adolescence awaits a series of resolutions and further crises, none of which is the end of our

self-development or self-creation. We will continually encounter situations and circumstances that challenge our agency or cause us to reconsider or re-realize our freedom and agency. Adolescence is merely the beginning of the long process of “growing-up” and creating a functional, likeable, healthy self that we experience throughout our lives. Adolescence is, at least partially, precisely the recognition of this fact; it is the loss of the sense of the self as determined and completed that was previously taken to be the case. The world that we live in is itself something ambiguous, indeterminate, and subject to change, and the human self must necessarily become fluid and dynamic as well. In order to navigate this world and our relationships successfully we must be adaptive, and this means that the self, like the family unit, must be dynamic and flexible enough to adapt—to accommodate and tolerate change—while still maintaining at least some of what allows us to experience the self as *ours*, as *belonging to* and *representing* who we take ourselves to be. The self is not something that is *finished*, it is something that is *lived*.

Conclusion. What we have seen in an examination of the function of the family and the role that others play throughout our early self-development is that other people are, from the very beginning of our lives, a critical, inescapable part of our self-development and self-creation. In fact, others are so much a part of the process of self-development and who we are that we first experience ourselves as *merged with* the other. Our initial experience of the world reveals to us no distinction between the self, other people, and the world. We are born into an illusion of the world as being *one*; we experience the illusion of being one with our environment and our primary caregiver(s). Inevitably, however, we gradually begin to experience the true nature of reality. First, we gradually become disillusioned and come to experience ourselves as somehow distinct and separate from others and the environments that we encounter. We gradually begin to realize that the world and the other people who inhabit it alongside us are not, in fact, under our control. As we continue to grow and age, we begin to realize that we are each an individual unit with a personal, ‘internal’ world, and we come to understand that the external world is something separate and distinct from who we are. However, we do not immediately realize what it actually *means* to be a self-contained, embodied consciousness with the powers of agency and freedom, nor do we necessarily recognize the full significance of these traits in others. For a while the child experiences the world as a determinate, already-made space that is defined and controlled

by adults. This is also true of the child's experience of himself: he initially believes that he actually is what other people take him to be and tell him that he is (or what he takes them to be telling him he is), just as he believes that the world is the place of good and evil and right and wrong that he was raised to believe it is. Thus, personal identity is, to a significant degree, constituted or *created* by others during this stage of our self-development. Gradually, however, the child begins to notice the contradictions and ambiguities that exist in all aspects of our experience. He comes to realize that adults *can* be wrong and that they sometimes *are*. He begins to see that the morals and values that he has been taught to believe may not actually be so clear-cut or true, and he comes to realize that he must figure out for himself who he is—his own ideas about what kind of person he is, who he wants to be, what he wants to do. While the child initially manages to subdue such thoughts, they eventually become too numerous and too prominent for him to ignore, and the child must inevitably continue down this path until he discovers the truth about his own subjectivity and the subjectivity of others. This is to say that, by the time the child can no longer hold back or ignore the multitude of questions that he has about reality and the nature of things, the child begins to realize what it truly means to be a *subject*, to be a *free, conscious, creative, agent*. The child thus realizes that the world is not, in fact, determined and fixed, and that he is *free*—free to participate in the creation of his own identity, his present, and his future. At the same time, the child realizes that the same is true of other people; the child realizes that each person is a unique subjectivity with a particular perspective on the world, and that others possess the same brand of freedom and creativity that he does. This is the point at which we say that the child has entered the stage of self-development referred to as *adolescence*. Adolescence is the final stage of our early self-development (though it has no fixed start- or —end-point, or duration) and it is the stage during which we finally begin to become more conscious of our participation in our own self-creation and development instead of being relatively-passive recipients of the will of others. Adolescence is the first time in our lives when we realize that we are called upon to make a *declaration* about we are and who we shall we become, what our morals and values are, what kind of life we plan to lead. The tables are, quite suddenly, turned. The child who was once expected to be the (relatively) passive and obedient recipient of the will of his society, his community, and his family is now called upon to take the active role and take the first step out into the world as an independent being that is capable of deciding its own future. Thus, adolescence is the final, shattering blow to the already

cracked and fragile illusion of the world of childhood that the child is accustomed to. It is, nonetheless, only the beginning—the beginning of a new chapter in the individual’s life where he is expected to be responsible for himself and his actions, for his creations, successes and failures, and for what he brings into the world. Yet, adolescence is not at all the end of the other’s participation in self-creation. As we learned earlier on, our continued interaction with other people is necessary and unavoidable, and who we are, who we can be, and what we can do will always, to some extent, be influenced and shaped by the various others who surround us and fill our lives.

2. CHAPTER TWO

This chapter intends to establish what, fundamentally and essentially, the phenomenon of play is and what its relationship to self-development might be. Chapter One argued that human experience and identity are both essentially and fundamentally *intersubjective*, and that, as a result, self-development is necessarily an intersubjective, interpersonal project. Building on these foundational claims, this chapter will argue for three main theses: (1) that play is a necessary and essential part of self-development; (2) that play is an inherently intersubjective phenomenon; and, following from the first two claims, (3) that our early play experiences—how we play, the quality and frequency of our play experiences, and whether our play is successful or not—really matter; failed or negative play experiences can have a significant, enduring impact on our sense of self and how we make sense of the world. These claims will be argued for using D. W. Winnicott’s account of what play is, and supported by the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty, Sartre, and R. D. Laing.

2.1 Part One: What Play is and the Role of Play in Childhood Self-Development

This section will argue for the claim that play is fundamentally and essentially a matter of self-development. In genuine acts of play the child is, as we will see, confronting reality and engaging with it in order to better make sense of the world and the self. This section will first consider the basic, “common-sense” view of what play is before arguing for Winnicott’s (1964/1971) account of play as an essential part of healthy self-development.

2.1.1 Section I: The “Commonsense” or “Cliché” Account of Play

While theorists still debate some aspects of what play is and how we should understand its role childhood development, there is at least some agreement regarding the most basic, general, “common sense” qualities that play must have. These agreed upon qualities are likely to be the ones that most immediately come to mind when we ask ourselves what play is. This section will offer a brief summary of the main common-sense qualities of play to demonstrate clearly that the reality of what play actually is exceeds the common-sense definition; to gain an

accurate understanding of what play is and a richer appreciation of the important role that plays in the child's development, we must first set aside certain presumptions and biases that stem from these common-sense accounts.

First and foremost, play must always be *fun* and *exciting*. This is likely the single-most important, universally-agreed-upon characteristic of play, and likely the most obvious one. If a particular activity or behaviour is not fun, then it cannot be considered *play* (Winnicott, 19; Glenn, Knight, Holt, & Spence, 2012; Field, De Stefano, & Koewler, 1982). When asked to define play and explain what makes something *playful*, the children involved in a study conducted by Glenn, Knight, Holt, & Spence (2012) answered that, above all else, play must be *fun*. If something is not fun or if it stops being fun, then it is not (or is no longer) *play* (p. 190). That play should be exciting goes hand-in-hand with the demand that it be fun; play activities should be engaging and stimulating, and be able to hold the child's active interest.

Many theorists have also argued that play should ultimately be *purposeless*; in play, the means should always be more important than the ends (Glenn et al., p. 190). A study conducted by Glenn et al. (2012) found that "children did not depict play as fulfilling a particular purpose or outcome" (p. 190). Even in cases where the play activity has a set goal or calls for the child to strive for a particular outcome (as with football or Monopoly), children still identify the means (i.e. the actual experience or process of playing towards that end) as being more important than the end-goal itself. This excludes activities that are overly-focused on end-results from being considered play (Glenn et al., p. 190). Prominent ecologist and evolutionary biologist, Gordon M. Burghardt, supports this claim, arguing that play "should not have an obvious function in the context in which it is observed—meaning that [play] has, essentially, no clear goal" (as cited in Wenner, 2009, p. 2). Thus, whatever end-goals a play activity does have are ultimately superficial, and are superseded by the need for that activity to be experienced as not really being about those end-goals. This is to say that there must always be an understanding that the goals and outcomes involved in the play activity are not actually or essentially what the play is about.

Keeping in mind these traits of fun, excitement, and purposelessness, it seems to make sense that many people think of play as being essentially disconnected from reality in an important way. At first glance, it may seem as though play is something of a "break" or "vacation" from reality or from the demands of day-to-day life. If someone is playing, then, we might like to think, they mustn't be working at anything meaningful, making any great effort, or

undertaking any kind of serious project. After all, work, effort, and seriousness are not traits that are likely to come to mind when we think of play. Work (and, perhaps, the rest of daily-living) is serious, effortful, exhausting, purposeful, and calculated. Play, on the other hand, is fun, effortless, exciting, pleasurable, and without purpose.

It is because of this seeming tension between play and the demands of an “adult” life that, for a long time, play was defined as the opposite of “work,” and was framed as something of a hedonistic *luxury*. Seen in this light, play was considered to be a fleeting repose that many are lucky enough to enjoy during their childhood years, but that is, ultimately, arbitrary and unrelated to ‘proper’ social development. Play was viewed as standing in opposition to socially desirable (and necessary) traits like discipline, obedience, diligence, self-control, and productivity. As such, play was viewed as something *optional* and *unnecessary*.⁴

However, academic and public views gradually moved away from this view of play as optional and arbitrary; they came to recognize that childhood play has an impact on proper cognitive and social development. Even in the context of this realization, though, right up to the end of the 20th century, many of these accounts of play focused on the “productive value” of play, stressing its utility as a means of education (Glenn et al., 2012, p. 190). Glenn et al. (2012) argue that one of the main issues with this mindset is that it “reflects an adult perspective and contemporary neo-liberal ideology whereby only productive ‘work’ is of value” (p. 190). These views have an unfortunate tendency to prioritize and promote play activities that serve specific, socially- and culturally-desirable ends. Reducing play to the mere means to particular, socially-desirable ends misses the point—it ignores the value that is inherent to play.

⁴ The result of this extreme attitude towards play can be seen most glaringly in the treatment of children in Victorian Workhouses during the time of the industrial revolution. Many economically disadvantaged children were forced—usually at a very young age—to endure horrific living conditions and to work brutal, physically exhausting jobs. These children were left with little to no time for play, and creativity and self-driven activities were discouraged. Poor children did not have time or permission to play, while children from wealthier families were discouraged from playing at a very young age (so that they could focus, instead, on becoming “proper” members of society) largely because “child-like” behaviours were viewed as being opposed to socially-desirable, “bourgeois” ideals (Hoffman, 1999, pp. 1-15). This attitude towards play was by no means limited to England or to the British Empire. Similar attitudes were observed throughout Europe and North America, and are reflected in the children’s literature from this period (Hoffman, 1999, pp.1-15). An especially popular example of this attitude towards play (and towards childhood more generally) can be found in the internationally-distributed collection of German nursery rhymes, *Struwwelpeter*, written and illustrated by Dr. Heinrich Hoffman as a gift for his three-year-old son.

Throughout the twentieth century, thinkers began to recognize and focus on the ways in which play is, in and of itself, beneficial to self-development and to overall health and well-being.⁵ Focus was also pulled away from promoting highly-structured, adult-directed play-activities and turned towards the critical importance of self-directed, “free play.” In response to this developing attitude towards play, in 1989 childhood play was deemed a fundamental *right* by the United Nations, and is explicitly included in The Convention on the Rights of the Child⁶ (UNICEF, 2017). Subsequently, numerous organizations⁷ were formed to protect the child’s right to (reasonably) free, unobstructed play, and to conduct ongoing research into the role of play in childhood development.

⁵ It may, at first glance, sound contradictory for this paper to simultaneously assert that the view of play as a mere means to properly socializing or educating a child is misguided and detrimental, but that we ought to recognize the benefits that play has with respect to the child’s healthy self-development. That is, it may sound as though one kind of utility is being rejected and another is being accepted. This is not quite the case. What this paper is saying is: (A) that viewing play primarily or solely as a means to conditioning children in a particular way and according to particular socio-cultural ends is detrimental; (B) Mental health and a healthy sense of self are both inherently valuable things; (C) Free, un-coerced, un-restricted play naturally leads to healthy self-development; and, finally, (D) that we need to examine play from the child’s point of view and, from that perspective, play is not good because of its potential benefits to cognitive or social functioning; from the child’s point of view, play is a good and valuable thing in and of itself. The child is not concerned with the utility or benefits of play. Rather, the child plays because it is pleasurable and fun to do so, and because it helps the child cope with his or her growing sense of reality and developing sense of self. However, while it is important to understand play from the child’s point of view and as inherently valuable, gaining a full and accurate understanding of what play really is also necessitates investigating exactly *why* play is so important to the child and what consequences occur as a result of the child being permitted to play freely and authentically. The theorists who have been concerned with the utility of play and how it can be harnessed to produce socially-desirable children were not primarily (or at all) concerned with play’s inherent value, its value and meaning to the child, or the child’s well-being and health self-development.

⁶ Article 31 of The Convention states: (1) “States Parties recognize the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts; (2) States Parties shall respect and promote the right of the child to participate fully in cultural and artistic life and shall encourage the provision of appropriate and equal opportunities for cultural, artistic, recreation and leisure activity” (UNICEF, 2017). The child’s right to play, while only mentioned explicitly in Article 31, is supported by related rights, such as: Article 13 (the right to freedom of expression in any form or media); Article 17 (the right to access age-appropriate information and material without unreasonable limitation or bias, including the right to age appropriate literature); and Article 29 (the right to an education and to “the development of the child’s personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential”) (UNICEF, 2017).

⁷ Some examples of organizations dedicated to the study of play and ensuring that play is treated as a fundamental human right include: The Association for the Study of Play, Alliance for Childhood, International Association for the Child’s Right to Play, KaBOOM!, The US Play Coalition, Boundless Playgrounds, Kid Source, Play Wales, and TRUCE.

Countless modern studies have corroborated the modern view that play is inherently valuable, with findings consistently showing that play is a critical part of early development. For example, studies conducted by Dr. Stuart Brown, a prominent psychiatrist, suggest that:

[A] lack of opportunities for unstructured, imaginative play can keep children from growing into happy, well-adjusted adults. “Free play,” as scientists call it, is critical for becoming socially adept, coping with stress, and building cognitive skills such as problem-solving. (as cited in Wenner, 2009, p. 1)

Between 1966 and 2009, Brown conducted an interview-based study that included over 6000 people. The aforementioned findings regarding the importance of play were the result of this study. Interestingly, Brown’s study revealed a shocking connection between a lack of adequate play in childhood and criminal behaviour (as cited in Wenner, 2009, p. 1). Additional research revealed that Charles Whitman (the infamous University of Texas mass murderer), along with 26 other Texan murderers involved in Brown’s study, had two main things in common with killers throughout the United States: (1) they all had some experience with childhood abuse or were raised in an abusive household, and (2) they rarely or never played as children (Wenner, 2009, p.1). Such findings are corroborated by numerous studies suggesting that “a play-deprived childhood disrupts normal social, emotional, and cognitive development” (Wenner, 2009, p. 1).

While a positive correlation between a lack of childhood play and criminal behaviour is certainly an extreme example of how a lack of play may influence an individual’s development, it serves as an attention-grabber and a conversation-starter. The primary or sole concern is not that a lack of adequate play experiences will cause children to become criminals. Rather, the primary concern is that we have sufficient evidence to demonstrate that childhood play and healthy self-development go hand-in-hand, and that, because of this, children can experience very real negative consequences as a result of having their play hindered. For example, Wenner (2009) says that “limiting free play in kids may result in a generation of anxious, unhappy and socially maladjusted adults” (p.1).

Thus, that play is a critical component of early development is an agreed upon fact. What we are left wondering, then, is *why* play is such an important part of childhood development. What is it about play that makes it such an important part of early self-development and identity formation? This paper contends that much of the answer to these questions is found in examining *what*, in essence, play is. This is to say that, in coming to recognize what play fundamentally is,

we gain an understanding of why play is an important and necessary part of self-development. Thus, through the writings of Winnicott, R. D. Laing, Merleau-Ponty, Sartre, and a handful of modern theorists, this chapter will (a) explain what the very essence of play is, and, in doing so (b) will demonstrate that play is necessarily an irreplaceable part of healthy self-development.

2.1.2 Section II: Winnicott's Account of Play as Arguing for Play as Self-development

In contrast to the mistaken belief that play is something unnecessary or that it is fundamentally about leisure and pleasure, this section argues that childhood play is essentially and fundamentally a matter of self-development. This is to say that, far from being a fantastical escape from the demands of reality, childhood play is, at its very core, the process of learning to deal with reality in a creative way that acknowledges the ways in which reality (and all the meaning therein) is always, to some extent or in some way, indeterminate and un-fixed. Reality is ambiguous, incomplete, and full of possibilities (and the possibility to create new possibilities). Through play, the child learns this and develops within himself the ability to handle, respond to, and make use of this ambiguity that envelops our world, while simultaneously developing the capacity to recognize and accept the limitations and boundaries that do exist. It is largely through play that the child comes to experience the world (and, subsequently, himself) as it truly is—as simultaneously indeterminate and limited.

Fantasy vs. Play. To demonstrate that play is a means through which the child engages with and makes sense of reality in a very important and meaningful way, we must first distinguish between acts of genuine play and instances where an individual is actually disconnected from reality. Understanding how play is different from dissociation will ultimately help make it clear that play is necessarily grounded in reality, and that it is ultimately a matter of the child trying to better understand and connect with their own reality. To illustrate the distinction between play and dissociative acts, we will consider Winnicott's distinction between pure fantasy (which is dissociative) and play (which is not dissociative).

Winnicott (1971) argues that genuine play is something different and distinct from mere *fantasy*; for Winnicott, mere fantasy is never enough to constitute *play*. Winnicott even goes so far as to claim that fantasy can *hinder* and *prevent* the successful occurrence of play (Ch. 2).

This is largely because genuine play occurs in the transitional area of experiencing. This means that play is a *transitional phenomenon*; play occurs in the blending of the internal and external realms of experiencing, in the overlap of subject and object, in the potential space between the mother and the infant.

Recall that transitional phenomena such as play occur in the intermediate area of our experiencing that exists somewhere between the personal, internal world of the individual, and the shared, external world of co-existence. It is a space in which our usual designations of “internal” and “external,” “subjective” and “objective,” “personal” and “shared” are skewed, blended, put on hold, or (temporarily) transcended. In other words, as noted earlier, Winnicott’s transitional area is akin to Merleau-Ponty’s notion of the “being-shared-by-two” that is achieved through authentic linguistic communication. Just as being-shared-by-two is the overlap of two or more distinct perspectives on the world, transitional phenomena exist as an overlap of internal and external experience, and of subject and object.

Winnicott notes that, while all experience falls along a continuum, the vast majority of our lives are lived out in the area where the internal and the external meet. Purely internal experience (e.g. dissociative fantasy) falls at one extreme end of the continuum, and purely external experience (e.g. rigid compliance or compulsive, habitual behavior) falls at the opposite extreme end. In the middle of these extremes is the transitional area. Again, the transitional area marks out the hypothetical space where the internal and external collide or unite, and it is within this area that most of our actual experiences fall; most of our experiences involve some “internal,” personal component and some “external” component that is connected to shared reality.

Because play is a transitional phenomenon that occurs in the transitional area of experiencing, play must necessarily have an *external manifestation*; play must involve some piece of external reality. It is largely this demand for external manifestation that separates play from mere fantasy. Pure fantasy necessarily involves dissociation from external reality. Play, on the other hand, makes use of some piece of external reality or has some impact on it. Thus, because of this requirement that play must involve some, bare minimum external expression, anything that is merely internal (i.e. has no external existence), such as pure fantasy, cannot be considered play. For example, we could consider the case of a young girl merely *daydreaming* about being a witch, contrasted with the case of a young girl *playing* at being a witch. In the case

where the girl is daydreaming, she is doing nothing but laying on her bed fantasizing about what it would be like to be a witch; external reality is not in any way influenced by her fantasy. In the case where the girl is playing, however, she is moving around the room singing and chanting, using an old salad bowl as a cauldron, using her mother's shawl as a cape, and casting spells to bring fortune to those she favors and curses to those who she is frustrated with. In this instance, the girl's play has a clear external manifestation and engages the girl more completely; she is fully engaged in the play activity, and both her inner and outer existences are thus united.

What Winnicott's account will reveal to us is that genuine play helps us *deal with* reality; it is a way of coping with and learning to manage the shared world that we inhabit. Through play, we come to recognize reality for what it actually is; play is an education in coming to recognize reality in all its ambiguity and inexhaustible meaningfulness. Shared reality is the inherently meaningful point of contact for countless consciousnesses, and, as such, it is filled to the brim with possibilities and variations that we must learn to recognize and navigate. Play allows us to do this.

Fantasy is precisely the opposite of dealing with reality; it is a *withdrawal from* reality. In *Playing and Reality* (1971) Winnicott presents a rather detailed case study to illustrate some of the key ways in which unhealthy ways of relating to fantasy can hinder both one's successful connection to reality as well as one's ability to play (pp. 35-50). Winnicott begins by noting that we exist as alternating between various states of being or modes of existing. Some of the main modes of existing that Winnicott distinguishes between are: fantasy and daydreaming, actual dreaming (i.e. the dreaming we are engaged in when we sleep), compulsive or habitual behaviour, play, and "normal" experience (pp.35-50). These behaviours can be placed at various points along the continuum of experience that Winnicott identifies: pure fantasy and daydreaming occur at the extreme end of internal experience; compulsive, habitual, and reflexive behaviours occur at the extreme end of external experience; and dreaming, play, and normal, healthy experience occur along various points in the "middle" area of our experience.

To further highlight the distinction between fantasy and transitional phenomena such as play, and to illustrate the ways in which fantasy can hinder or prevent an individual's ability to play, Winnicott (1971) proceeds to discuss the case of a young woman who had spent most of her life in a dissociative state of self-indulgent fantasy (pp. 35-50). The case study of this woman, who we shall refer to as "Patient X," shall be revisited throughout our investigation of

Winnicott's account of what play is in order to provide a consistent, concrete example of the traits of play that Winnicott identifies.

Winnicott (1971) explains that Patient X was the youngest of several children. As such, Winnicott explains how she found herself growing up in an environment that had already been determined and organized before she became a part of it (p. 38-39). Because Patient X was the youngest child, her older siblings already had well-established, agreed-upon ways of playing that she did not find to be satisfactory; Patient X did not experience her siblings' play activities as allowing room for her own play-style and play preferences. Because of this, Patient X participated in her siblings' play activities in external appearance only, going through the outward motions of play without fully involving herself in the play-activities; she demonstrated a high level of passive compliance to her siblings' play-preferences, agreeing to play whatever role was assigned to her. However, while she was, on the outside, performing the play behaviours that were expected of her, she was all the while lost in her own, internal fantasy, entirely disconnected (on a psychological level) from her siblings' play. Though her siblings did not notice, Patient X was *essentially absent* from the play activities that she appeared to be engaging in (p. 39). Winnicott goes on to explain that:

She really lived in this fantasizing on the basis of a dissociated mental activity. This part of her which became thoroughly dissociated was never the whole of her, and over long periods her defence was to live here in this fantasizing activity, and to watch herself playing the other children's games as if watching someone else in the nursery group. (p. 39)

Because Patient X did not experience external, shared reality as making room for her and her needs, she established for herself a rich mental life of fantasy. In her fantasizing, Patient X could "act out" and satisfy all the wants and desires she had that her external reality was not capable of satisfying. In other words, because Patient X did not experience her siblings' play activities as satisfactory, she participated in them only superficially while maintaining a private, purely internal world where she could "play" however she pleased.

These early play-activities set the precedent for the whole of Patient X's experience of reality, and for her developing sense of self. Starting with these childhood play-experiences, Patient X went on to live out the subsequent portion of her life striving to keep her internal reality separate from external reality. Winnicott says, "she became a specialist in this one thing: being able to have a dissociated life while seeming to be playing with the other children in the

nursery” (p. 39). This way of relating to childhood play was then extended to the rest of her experience; in much the same way as she did when playing with her siblings, Patient X went through life pretending to be connected to reality and other people, performing the tasks and responsibilities that were demanded of her in a purely superficial way. While she was doing this, she kept herself separated from external reality, profoundly dissociated through constant internal fantasizing (p.39). Patient X developed in such a way that her experiences of the internal and external realms were kept separate, without any meaningful overlap. In this way, she was able to appear to be living a normal, meaningful life to spectators, while all the while keeping herself firmly disconnected from reality.

The main point that can be taken away from the example of Patient X is that she spent her childhood engaged in other children’s play activities in a very superficial, passive, compliant way, and turned to fantasizing and daydreaming in order to make up for the ways in which her reality was disappointing her. In contrast to this, authentic acts of play call upon the individual to be fully present in their activities and to find ways of manifesting their desires and mental content in reality. Through play, the child learns how to take what is “inside” of them (e.g. as a thought, feeling, expectation, or desire) and bring it into external reality (thus making it real). The child also learns how to take what is present in external reality and reconcile whatever is there with their own mental life. In these ways, and others, genuine play leads to the blending of the internal and external realms of experiencing. The story of Patient X intends to help illustrate the difference between mere fantasy and genuine acts of play, and to demonstrate how the deprivation of play in early childhood can negatively impact the child’s developing self.

Unification of the self and world through play. In reality, there is no clear distinction between the internal and external realms of experience; they are ambiguous and intertwined. To say that our being-for-self is inseparable from our being-for-others (a claim made by both Merleau-Ponty and Sartre) is precisely to say that our personal, internal mental lives are inextricably related to external, shared reality. To spend one’s life engaged in dissociative fantasy is to deny the reality of one’s subjectivity and of one’s relation to the world and to others. Thus, someone who is living in this way is incapable of relating to shared reality, to others, and to the self in a meaningful, productive way. It is precisely because this is the case that Patient X sought out Winnicott’s assistance; keeping her internal and external experiences separate meant

leading two, relatively distinct lives (i.e. an internal life of fantasy and an external life of empty gestures and passive compliance to the demands of reality). In both lives that Patient X was leading, she was unconnected to reality and to others in any meaningful way, and she ultimately ended up experiencing herself as *incomplete*; Patient X was incapable of experiencing herself as a “whole person,” and, as a result, did not feel that she was a real human being in the way that other people are (p. 39).

In *The Child, the Family, and the Outside World* (1964), Winnicott states explicitly that children play because it promotes the unification of the personality, and the unification of the internal and external realms of experience (p.p. 144-145). Winnicott explains:

Play and the use of art forms, and religious practice, tend in various but allied ways towards a unification and general integration of the personality. For instance play can easily be seen to link the individual's relation to inner reality with the same individual's relation to external or shared reality. In another way of looking at this highly complex matter, it is in play that the child *links ideas with bodily function* [my emphasis]. (p. 145)

Internal reality is home to “ideas” and other mental content, while external reality is home to bodily functions and contact with material objects. As we have seen in the example of Patient X, failure to unite one's relation to inner reality with one's relation to external reality can cause one's experience of the world to fall on the extreme side of internal experience. Experience falling at this extreme end of the spectrum of experience constitutes what Winnicott calls *dissociative fantasy*. This extreme lack of unification of the personality resulting in excessive, dissociative fantasy is what we see illustrated in the example of Patient X.

In contrast to this, at the other extreme end of the spectrum of experience, we find behaviours such as *compulsive masturbation* (Winnicott, 1964, p. 145). Winnicott (1964) notes that healthy masturbation and the phenomenon of play are similar in that they both involve a sort of union between the internal and the external; in healthy masturbation, internal fantasy is united with physical, bodily expression (p. 145). However, there is a distinction to be made between healthy masturbation and play: in masturbation, the primary and dominating factor is *sensual, bodily experience*. This is to say that, in masturbation, fantasy *belongs to* or *serves* the sensual act. In play, on the other hand, “conscious and unconscious ideas hold sway, and the related bodily activities are either in obedience or else are harnessed to the play content” (p. 145). In other words, this is to say that the end goal in masturbation is the physical pleasure and the

fantasy serves as a means to that pleasure or as a coinciding, heightening factor. On the other hand, in play, the end goal is the creative experience that is fueled by the use of imagination and creative fantasy, while any sensuality or bodily involvement is more so a means of expressing or manifesting that creativity.

Thus, it is the case that healthy, successful instances of both play and masturbation involve some kind of union or blending of the internal and external and of fantasy and bodily experience, though the internal component is stronger in play and the bodily component is stronger in masturbation. In other words, both masturbation and play contribute to the unification of the human self or personality.

However, when the delicate balance between the internal and external components is thrown off, the masturbatory or playful act may cease to be healthy and productive, and may contribute to the dissociation or breakdown of the self (pp. 145-146). Winnicott (1964) uses the example of masturbation to demonstrate how an *excess* of either the internal or external components of experience works against successful unification of the human self or personality. Essentially, Winnicott contrasts the two extremes of *compulsive masturbation* and *dissociative fantasy* to demonstrate his point (pp. 145-146). In cases of compulsive masturbation, the individual focuses on achieving the external expression of masturbation—i.e. the bodily component of masturbation—without having the accompanying, internal component of fantasy, and usually does so *compulsively* and repetitively. In compulsive masturbation, the union between the internal and external realms of experience is dissolved, and the internal component of experience is, essentially, ignored altogether. In cases of dissociative fantasy, on the other hand, the individual focuses on experiencing the internal component of fantasy without achieving the external, bodily manifestation of that fantasy, thus cutting the individual off from external, bodily experience.

In both of these examples of *excess* of one component over the other, proper integration of the personality is prevented, and internal and external worlds of the individual fail to be united. This can lead to what Winnicott (1964) refers to as a *divided personality* (pp. 145-146). This phenomenon is what was illustrated in the case study of Patient X.

Winnicott (1964) goes on to emphasize that the point that he is trying to make through his discussion of fantasy and masturbation is that the same pitfalls that we can encounter with

respect to masturbation extend to the phenomenon of play.⁸ For example, the content of compulsive daydreaming need not be sexual in nature or related to the act of masturbation in any way—the essential point is that daydreaming is excessive and dissociative in all instances where such compulsive fantasizing is “free from either localized or general bodily excitement” (p. 145). Winnicott emphasizes that it is when we come across such cases of *excess* or *deficiency* that we are able to “recognize most clearly the healthy tendency that there is in play which relates the two aspects of life [i.e. the internal and the external] to each other, bodily functioning and the aliveness of ideas” (p. 145). Winnicott goes on to say that:

Play is the alternative to sensuality in the child’s effort to keep whole. It is well known that when anxiety is relatively great sensuality becomes compulsive, and play becomes impossible. Similarly, when one meets with a child in whom the relation to inner reality is unjoined to the relation to external reality, in other words, whose personality is seriously divided in this respect, we see most clearly how normal playing (like the remembering and telling of dreams) is one of the things that tend towards the integration of the personality. The child with such serious splitting of the personality cannot play, or cannot play in ways that are generally recognizable. (p. 145)

Thus, we are again reminded that the relationship between a child’s ability to play and his healthy self-development is *circular*: the child who enjoys healthy self-development will become capable of healthy play, and healthy play in turn leads to and encourages healthy self-development. These two aspects of experience go hand-in-hand, and it appears that successfully achieving either one would be extremely difficult, if not impossible, without the other.⁹

We have seen, then, one way in which play is inherently a matter of self-development and of coming to understand reality. In play, the child learns that the external and internal realms of experience are, in fact, inextricably connected and that they are constantly influencing one another. The child consequently learns about his own ability to have a meaningful impact on shared reality; he learns that he can turn his thoughts, feelings, and desires into behaviours and

⁸ (Perhaps we could even go so far as to say that healthy instances of masturbation are a form of play in their own right, though exploring this possibility would warrant more attention than this paper can accommodate.)

⁹ However, this is not to say that one cannot learn later on in life how to play for the first time, how to play well, or how to play differently, nor should it suggest that the individual who did not experience healthy self-development or who did not learn how to play well in childhood can never be whole. This is because the human self is fluid, dynamic, creative, free, and transcendent. While it may be difficult and while we can never undo our past traumas, or our experiences of childhood neglect or deprivation, there is always the hope and the possibility to re-shape ourselves and our habits, and to learn what we can of how to play well.

actions that will actually shape the world that he inhabits, just as he discovers how much the external world influences his own mental life.

Object-use, creativity, and freedom in play. For a more explicit illustration of what Winnicott means when he says that play must necessarily involve some external manifestation or have some tangible impact on shared reality, we can turn to his account of *object-use*. Winnicott claims that genuine acts of play necessarily involve *object-use* or *the creative use of objects*. In fact, Winnicott (1971) considers creative object-use to be one of the most critically important and universal features of healthy play (pp. 115-127).

Winnicott (1971) defines *object-use* as the process by which the child alters or entirely transforms the *meaning* of an externally-existing object to suit his own desires and needs. In other words, object-use occurs whenever a child assigns new meaning to an object or uses an object in an unconventional or newly-discovered way. As examples of this, we could consider a child using a bowl as a hat, an umbrella as a sword, or a sock as a puppet. However, object-use can involve the manipulation of just about anything, including people, places, animals.

A study conducted by Glenn et al. (2012) revealed that the play preferences of children are highly personal and subjective, varying from child to child and across age-groups (pp. 188-189). The children involved in their study reported that they “saw almost anything as an opportunity for play” (p. 189). They found that children enjoy playing in a wide range of spaces, from playgrounds to building sites to neighborhood streets. Furthermore, they found that children often “re-purpose” existing, accessible spaces into play spaces, even if the space being transformed originally had an entirely different function or purpose (p. 187). One child participant in Glenn et al.’s study even said that “where” did not matter at all to him so long as he had people to play with and some kind of (sports) ball. In general, Glenn et al. note that children demonstrate a “common resourcefulness” where available spaces *become* spaces to play; this is to say that children are able to *create* spaces to play where they did not previously exist before (pp. 187-189). The child’s ability to transform the meaning and function of a particular setting or environment to suit his play needs (or, conversely, the child’s ability to adapt his play to the limitations imposed by the play-spaces that are made available to him) are examples of the phenomenon that Winnicott calls “object-use.”

Object-use necessarily involves *creativity* and *imagination*. For a child to be able to successfully manipulate or transform an object's meaning or purpose, he must be capable of being creative. Thus, Winnicott (1971) also identifies creativity as an essential feature of healthy play and as a necessary component of healthy self-development (pp. 136-137). Genuinely creative acts do not have pre-determined, fixed start- and end-points, and they occur more-or-less spontaneously. Thus, it is important that we not attempt to direct, limit, or control another person's play or creativity in a way that could obstruct or prevent the creative process from occurring naturally or completing itself. In being spontaneously creative we are afforded a sense of authenticity and agency that we do not typically experience in other aspects of our lives where our activities are often directed and where we can be pressured or coerced into compliant obedience. In play and creativity, our actions are entirely or largely self-directed and self-determined. In being creative, the individual is free to set the terms and parameters of his conduct, and to bring to life entirely new meanings and senses that were not present to him before.

Thus, Winnicott (1971) argues that it is "only in playing that the individual [...] 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). Through play we are able to uncover and enact our own creativity, and by using that creative potential we are able to make discoveries and have novel experiences that we could not have otherwise had. Creativity is thus not only a crucial component of play, but it is an essential part of self-development, self-creation, and self-transformation, and of healing, progress, and self-understanding (Ch. 4).

Winnicott (1971) explains that individuals who live and experience reality too externally are too embedded in reality and are likely to be too conforming and rigid (i.e. less free and creative) in their relationship to reality, thus preventing them from having as rich and fulfilling a life as individuals who are more well-balanced. Winnicott identifies *compliance* or a *compliant attitude* as being the proper opposite of creativity (or as representing the absence of the creative capacity). If creativity enables healthy instances of play, then compliance and conformity hinder them. However, our ability (or inability) to be creative extends beyond the realm of play. Again, it is our ability to be creative that allows us to transform the meaning of common objects, bring to life new possibilities, and to use our imaginations. Our capacity to do these things in turn allows us to discover new things about ourselves or others, or to come to see the world in new

and meaningful ways. As the opposite of creativity, then, a compliant attitude hinders or prevents these things; too much compliance prevents us from being able to see the countless ways in which we can manipulate the meaning of the world around us, and prevents us from exploring the overwhelming possibilities that are inherent to the world and to our own identities. We can again consider Winnicott's Patient X, whose compliant attitude towards her siblings prevented her from being able to play in authentic ways that she experienced as satisfying.

A child will only be able to alter or adapt the meaning of his play-environments or play-activities if he is capable of being sufficiently creative and if he has achieved the successful unification of the internal and external realms of experience (i.e. the successful development of the transitional area) and, as a result, the unification of his personality. Children who are too grounded in reality (i.e. who are too compliant) may have trouble deviating from factual content and the laws of day-to-day reality. For example, a child who is too compliant and who is incapable of being sufficiently creative may find that he 'cannot' play a character that flies because flying is, in reality, impossible. Similarly, such a child may be incapable of acting out a different ending to a familiar movie or story because the narrative that he is basing his play on has a definitive ending in the real world. In general, children who cannot be sufficiently creative may have a difficult time coming up with their own imaginary characters and stories, and will find themselves limited in play in the same ways that they are limited in day-to-day living.

This is not, however, to say that children are ever *completely free* in play; freedom in general is always influenced and limited by our present situations. Thus, the ways in which children will be able to use their creativity and play are always somewhat dependent on environmental and parental provision, as well as various other factors related to each child's unique situation. Children's play preferences and play-styles are influenced by their parents' and siblings' (and other close others') own play preferences. The influence of others' play preferences on our own is inevitable. This is largely because the first people we play with as children are our parents, and, while good-enough parents will adapt their own play-preferences to their children's and encourage their children's creativity and the development of unique play-styles, we are still influenced by the ways in which other people make themselves available to us and what tools and environments are made available for us to use in our play.

Thus, while Glenn et al. (2012) found that children were willing to play and capable of playing just about anywhere, they also found that children generally distinguish between *indoor*

and *outdoor* play spaces, and that children experience play location and type as influencing their choice of play activity. For example, indoor locations seemed to make children feel more inclined to engage in more sedentary and passive play activities, such as video games, as well as more low-energy imaginative and creative play, such as crafts and make-believe. Outdoor locations, on the other hand, seem to encourage children to engage in more movement-focused activities and more physically-involved imaginative endeavors (p. 192). Most of the children in Glenn et al.'s study reported that they generally prefer to play *outside*. They report that "Children desired spending time outside because outside spaces provided more space to play and a variety of different activities" and also because "it provided them with the opportunity to engage in 'messy' play and risk-taking behaviors" (193). It was also found that parental concerns, such as weather conditions and temperature, regarding outdoor locations were not viewed as deterrents for most children; most children reported a willingness and ability to play despite these factors and to adapt their play to meteorological conditions (p. 193).

Glenn et al. (2012) also found that the child's innovation and ability to be creative also extend to their playmates. Children are capable of playing with a fairly wide range of people that can include peers, siblings, parents and other adults, strangers, and even animals, such as family pets (p. 187). This is to say that children who are capable of healthy, creative play are capable of having rather extensive and varied "social networks," and their play activities are not necessarily restricted by or dependent on who, exactly, is available to play. The only real criteria that the children in Glenn et al.'s study provided were that they prefer playmates who want to play and enjoy playing the same things as them, and that they want to play with people who are 'fun' and 'nice' to them (p.193). This ability to use and relate to other people creatively is an extension or expression of the child's ability to engage in object-use. In play, the child is able to overcome the boundaries of socially-dictated roles and relationships in order to engage in meaningful acts of play with other individuals. For example, in a game of make-believe, the child is (at least to some extent) capable of seeing his mother not merely as his *mother*, but as the monster or queen or knight in shining armor that she is playing.

What can be inferred from Winnicott's discussions of the relationship between fantasy, reality, and creativity, as well as his earlier discussion of the relationship between play and the transitional area of experience, then, is that, just as we cannot *be* creative without *acting* creatively and actually creating something, any activity that does not have some sort of external

manifestation or impact on reality cannot be said to be *play*. In other words, play *must have some level of external manifestation*, it *must* have some grounding in, relation to, or impact on reality to be considered play. This is why mere fantasy cannot be considered play, and why, following from this, the mere manipulation of mental concepts, images, and symbols cannot properly be considered genuine *object-use*. Just as fantasy must have some external component that ties it back into reality before it can be considered play, so too must the manipulation or transformation of mental concepts have some impact on the external world before it can properly be considered object-use.

When we think about the creative use of ideas and mental concepts in this way, we are also brought back to Merleau-Ponty's conception of first-order speech. In first-order speech, we are often re-purposing or transforming the meaning of commonly-understood, shared linguistic concepts and techniques (i.e. second-order speech) in order to bring about a new way of understanding or relating, or to bring into being an altogether new meaning. Thus, it could be said that Merleau-Ponty's notion of first-order speech is itself a form of what Winnicott terms *object-use*, or, rather, that Winnicott's notion of object-use is *an extension of Merleau-Ponty's* idea of first-order speech. It seems as though Winnicott's formulation of object-use takes the fundamental principles of first-order speech and extends them beyond the mere use of language, applying them to other tangible, existing objects.

It has already been noted that Merleau-Ponty's idea of the being-shared-by-two that is achieved through first-order linguistic communication appears to be the same sort of phenomenon as Winnicott's idea of the transitional area; in being-shared-by-two, one's being-for-self and being-for-others is merged, and the difference in perspectives between individuals is put on hold or temporarily transcended. Similarly, in the transitional area opened up in play, one's personal, internal experience and one's experience of the shared, external world are merged together, and, when more than one individual is involved in the play experience, one's being-for-self and being-for-others are similarly merged or transcended. This is to say that, through play, we are able to access the other's perspective and, in doing so, transcend or enrich our own, limited perspective.

This is something that Winnicott (1964) acknowledges when he argues that children play to gain experience (pp. 144-145). Play affords children the opportunity to have experiences that they could not otherwise have. Winnicott explains:

Play is a big part of [the child's] life. External as well as internal experience can be rich for the adult, but for the child the riches are to be found chiefly in play and fantasy. Just as the personalities of adults develop through their experience in living, so those of children develop through their own play, and through the play inventions of other children and adults. By enriching themselves children gradually enlarge their capacity to see the richness of the externally real world. Play is the continuous evidence of creativity, which means aliveness. (p. 144)

In playing with others, children create, use, and work with their own creations as well as the creations of others, and they learn to create *with others*. As children, much of our lives is dictated and structured by others. We are not yet fully responsible for ourselves and our actions, and we are extensively reliant on others for guidance, structure, and education about the world that we inhabit. As we saw in Chapter One, it is also the case that we are not fully aware of our own subjectivity or of the subjectivity of others, meaning that we do not fully understand our own agency and the extent of our freedom. Because of these factors, it is primarily in play that the child is afforded the opportunity to exercise his freedom and make use of his creative capacity in meaningful, impactful ways. It could be said that one of the primary functions of the childhood play-space is to serve as an arena in which we can *practice at* being free, creative, and responsible for ourselves.

Thus, genuine play calls for a high level of active participation from the child. This is to say that the child who is engaged in creative play is actively determining and contributing to the play-space, creating and introducing content, actively using and manipulating content that is introduced, and that the child is fully present in the act of playing; the child engaged in free and genuine play is not assuming the position of being a passive recipient of someone else's creative force or will, and is not sitting idly by as the game goes on; the child engaged in creative play is the driving force (or one of the driving forces) behind the continuation, advancement, and expansion of the play activity. This is not to say, however, that the child is constantly asserting themselves, or that they are constantly *active* in the physical sense. If a child is playing with others, then turn-taking, compromise, and some level of passivity are required. Developing these fundamental interpersonal skills is a way of answering to the reality of others' perspectives and initiatives. In this sense, the child may not be seen as being perpetually active in the sense of being the sole, constant driving force behind the play. However, the child will be continuously

engaged and ready to pull his weight in advancing the game. If he is not, then the play will cease to be play for him.

To help illustrate the importance of the child's full presence and active engagement with the play activity, we can again consider the example of Winnicott's Patient X. Because Patient X did not experience the play activities that she shared with her siblings as making room for or permitting her own, active contributions, she took on a primarily passive role; she would do what was necessary to help maintain or advance the game that her siblings were playing, but she was never fully present in the play activity and did not contribute her own content to the play-space. In this sense, she was never actually *playing*, though she was participating in the games that her siblings played.

This revisiting of the story of Patient X brings us into another important point about play: Because play should, in all cases, be a free and creative endeavor on the part of the individual, Winnicott warns that attempts to control or dominate a child's play can prevent the child from experiencing its positive effects. If anyone forces a child to play, demands that they play in a particular way, or limits too dramatically the possible ways in which the child can play, then the child's play will not be a *creative* act of *self-expression*. It is important that play be voluntary and *spontaneous* (Winnicott, 1971, Ch. 3).

Winnicott (1971) does note, of course, that the play of children must often be supervised to some extent and have some set parameters in place in order to avoid undue risk or harm (Ch.3). While risk is an important characteristic of play, a line does need to be drawn between what level of risk is necessary for play to occur successfully and what would count as *excessive*. If an individual attempts to remove all risk from play or to mitigate it too severely, then the child will not be able to play creatively and may experience a sense of loss of ownership over his activities (or even a loss of the desire to play). If adults and supervisors place too many restrictions on the play of children or tell the children what they must play, then the children will no longer be engaging in *their own play* or *playing in their own way*. Furthermore, when play is hindered and restricted in these ways, removing the creativity and spontaneity from the act, it encourages the child to develop an attitude of *compliance* that can ultimately lead to illness and poor self-development.

Again, this is what we have seen illustrated in the example of Winnicott's Patient X: her older siblings already had well-established, structured ways of playing that *they* created and

found to be enjoyable and rewarding, and they (knowingly or not) imposed on Patient X in such a way that she did not perceive her play-experiences with her siblings as making room for her own agency; Patient X did not experience her siblings' play-games as allowing for her to engage in *her own play*. Instead she felt compelled to play in the ways that was asked or told to. We will recall that this lack of freedom and creative agency in her childhood play experiences had a lasting impact on Patient X. It was through these early play experiences that Patient X developed the outwardly compliant attitude that she used to get through daily living while masking the fact that she was largely dissociated from shared reality, and that she spent most of her life living 'inside of herself' where she was able to have the (superficial) experience of herself as being free, in control, and creative. However, because she was only able to embody these traits in her fantasy, Patient X did not actually embody these traits; there was never any external manifestation of the self that she daydreamed about. Ultimately, what should be taken away from this is that play is an expression or manifestation of our freedom, and that, as such, play must occur *freely, spontaneously, and voluntarily*.

Play as allowing an experience of *formlessness*. According to Winnicott (1971), one of the most important ways in which play contributes to healthy self-development is by affording the child *a state of non-purposive existence*, an experience of *formlessness of the self* (Ch. 2, Ch. 4). A formless state of existence is, essentially, one which involves a deconstructing or letting go of the self in order to explore the many and varied possibilities for alternative ways of being and relating. In a formless state, we let go of our assumptions and preconceived notions about who we are, who we have been, and who we ought to be. In doing so, we allow ourselves to *just be*—to be in the moment, or to “try on” new ways of being.

What Winnicott is describing in his concept of non-purposive existence is the state of being in which we allow ourselves to recognize and entertain the multitude of possibilities that exist beneath the surface of our experience as concrete and determined; it is by allowing ourselves to exist without inhabiting a particular, determinate form (that would otherwise cause us to experience ourselves as subjected to a specific, fixed reality) that we open ourselves up to recognizing and making sense of the possibilities that are inherent to our human situation.

For Winnicott (1971), this experience of formlessness in play goes together with or is largely the result of the individual's ability to be free and creative. He says that both play and

psychotherapy should “afford opportunity for formless experience, and for creative impulses, motor and sensory, which are the stuff of playing. And on the basis of playing is built the whole of man’s experiential existence” (p. 86). In other words, Winnicott is here reiterating his belief that healthy, genuine play is, essentially and at its very core, self-driven and creative, and that our play experiences go on to shape our experience of reality; healthy living and a healthy sense of self and world make use of the same qualities as healthy, genuine play experiences.

Winnicott (1971) describes the experience of formlessness as permitting true *relaxation* (pp. 73-75). In our experience of formlessness, we can experience relaxation in the sense that we are able to free ourselves from our anxieties for a period of time, set them aside, and move onward. It is this state of formlessness that makes creative play possible, and that allows for self-exploration and self-discovery. To discover what the self *could be*, we must be able to leave the self that we already *are* somewhere else; we must be capable of setting our usual self aside or putting it on hold long enough for us to explore and inhabit alternative possibilities.

In other words, the self experienced as formless is a sort of regression back into an unorganized (or differently organized¹⁰) state of existence that is not bound by the rules and restrictions of the presently-existing self, by the personality, by others, or by specific societal rules and regulations. In the formless state we need not worry about seeming proper, or “grown up,” or appearing dominant and composed; in this state we are able to explore ourselves and be whoever we feel like being at that moment. The experience of formlessness allows for the removal of pressures and for non-persecutory self-exploration and discovery. Formlessness affords the individual a sense of existing in which he doesn’t *have to be* anything at all; there isn’t anything that he *should* or *shouldn’t* be and he is free to bring to the table whatever pleases (or displeases) him: he is free to talk, to shout, to create, to destroy, to freely associate, to speak in ways that he may not have spoken before—he is free to *play*.

For example, in the psychoanalytic situation we find a form of play that grows out of this formlessness: the patient is able to experience an intimate relationship with the analyst in which the analyst has no expectations for who the patient should be or how he should act (beyond the

¹⁰ The formless self need not be *unorganized*; it would, perhaps, be more accurate to say that formlessness allows for the self to be organized differently. The transitional area allows us to experiment with previous ways of being and entirely new ones, and allows for us to be more- or less-organized; it is the ultimate possibility for self-experimentation, and can be organized (or not) in whatever respects and to whatever extent the individual desires.

limitations necessary to ensure the safety of both parties). Because of this, the patient can act without undue restriction and without the pressure of judgment, and, in doing, is able to play freely—at his own pace and in his own way—so that he may explore himself and his situation. In this sense, we could say that formlessness allows the individual to be *honest* with himself and about himself in ways that he perhaps cannot in his daily living.

In the process of presenting the case study of Patient X, Winnicott (1971) illuminates what formlessness is and the critical role that it can play in healthy self-development (pp. 43-49). Winnicott explains how, during their time working together, Patient X had a waking dream in which she was frantically planning and cutting out the pattern for a dress (p. 43).¹¹ When Patient X came to and became aware of what she was doing, she was very distraught and found herself actually acting out the dress-making process. Winnicott explains how, if this scenario of Patient X patterning a dress is merely fantasy, then patterning a dress just is what it is and has no deeper meaning. However, if Patient X patterning a dress is taken as dream content, then there is deeper meaning and symbolic value to be uncovered (pp. 45-46).

In explaining the symbolic value of Patient X's dream, Winnicott (1971) explains how an *un-patterned dress*—the materials and fabrics before they are given purpose and altered accordingly—is representative of *formlessness*; an un-patterned dress is the *formless* state of the already-patterned, assembled dress (p. 45). From this, we can infer that the dress that is already made (or that one is being compelled to make) is symbolic of the traits and qualities of experience that stand in opposition to the experience of formlessness, namely compliance and conformity. Winnicott reminds the reader that “[Patient X's] childhood environment seemed unable to allow her to be formless but must, as she felt it, pattern her and cut her out into shapes conceived by other people” (pp.45-46). In other words, from Patient X's perspective, “there had been no one [...] in her childhood who had understood that she had to begin in formlessness” (p. 46).

Thus, dream-like experience of compulsively patterning a dress can be taken as a comment on Patient X's identity, personality, and her “self-establishment” (Winnicott, 1971, p.

¹¹ Note that Winnicott (1971) goes on to explain that this “waking dream” caused he and Patient X to delve deeper into the question of how, exactly, dreams are distinct from fantasy, and the question of what the middle-ground between the two, opposing phenomena should be called. Winnicott explains how Patient X eventually came to realize that her waking dream was *not* actually a dream (p. 45). Winnicott then goes on to say that, during this stage of his work with Patient X, he began to refer to all “generalized dream activity,” which is distinct from dreaming, as “formlessness” (p. 47).

45). Patient X experienced a significant amount of doubt and concern regarding whether *she* had been patterned like a dress. Patient X was afraid that the absence of opportunities for her to explore her sense of self freely and creatively during her childhood may have left her to be patterned by other people with little regard for who she actually was, of her own accord, and who she really wanted to be. Patient X's childhood was marked by rigid conformity and compliance in the face of her closest others, and, as a result, meant that she had not had adequate experiences of free, self-directed play during which she could experience, explore, and enjoy her own formlessness. Winnicott explains:

All the time, however, she was showing a great fear of loss of identity as if it might turn out that she had been so patterned, at that the whole thing was playing at being grown-up; or playing at making progress for the analyst's sake along the lines laid down by the analyst. (p. 46)

This is to say that Patient X's lack of positive childhood play experiences and of the experience of self-directed formlessness caused her to develop into a person who could not be entirely sure that who she is the person that *she* wanted to be, or that, because she has gone through life as the passive recipient of the (perceived) will of others, that who she is is not really *her*. Patient X does not have the experience of herself as someone whom she has *chosen*, of her own volition, to be; she does not experience herself as *self-created*. Thus, as an adult, she began to question how much of her life was actually her own doing and as a result of her own beliefs and desires, and how much was due to passive conformity like the kind she exhibited in childhood play activities with her siblings.

Winnicott's (1971) discussion of Patient X's dream of dress-making as it relates to formlessness is thus the story of Patient X gradually discovering her own agency—her own *freedom*—for the first time. She does this through getting in touch with the experience of formlessness that she missed out on in her childhood. The lack of opportunities to experience genuine formlessness in childhood and in her play experiences had contributed to the development of Patient X's unhealthy involvement with dissociative fantasy, preventing her from being able to experiment with her own freedom and agency, and hindering her ability to be creative and entertain alternate possibilities about who she was or could become.

Play, socialization, and the subjectivity of others. As well as providing us with a chance to learn about and practice our own agency, play serves as a rich opportunity to learn about others. Winnicott (1964) argues that children play in order to make social connections and to gain an understanding of the subjectivity of others (p. 144). In the earliest stages of infancy and childhood, the child either plays alone or with his primary caregiver(s). Then, as the child's level of separation from the mother increases and as the child begins to interact with a greater number of people, the child gradually becomes capable of playing with a greater variety of others and becomes capable of integrating them into his play-space. Winnicott explains that:

[O]ther children are not immediately in demand as playmates. It is largely through play, in which children are fitted into preconceived roles, that a child begins to allow these others to have an independent existence... children make friends and enemies during play, while they do not easily make friends apart from play. Play provides an organization for the initiation of emotional relationships, and so enables social contacts to develop. (pp. 144-145)

As we have noted, for young children, the world in which they exist is one that is still relatively small, determined, and structured by others. Our analysis of intersubjectivity and the experience of others in Chapter One revealed to us that we first encounter the world as more-or-less determinate and fixed, and we do not yet possess a meaningful understanding of our own freedom and the freedom of others. Thus, in childhood, it may not be immediately apparent how others who exist outside the boundaries of our immediate familial and social situations fit into our lives and what their existence means for us; we do not immediately grasp how we should relate to others.

For example, a very young child may understand that he has a “mommy,” a “daddy,” a “sister,” a “brother,” a “nana,” a “pet” named George, and an “auntie,” and may have some understanding that other people who do not fit into the immediate structure of his family are “strangers.” Thus, when the child first begins to encounter other children, though he may recognize that, at the very least, they are not any of the aforementioned labels—that they are *not family*, he does not necessarily understand how these other children actually relate to him and what role they are supposed to play in his life. Through play, however, the child can come to relate to these other children as “good guys” or “allies,” or as “enemies” or “villains,” and this is enough to create the space necessary in the child's mind and in his life to find a way to make sense of these other children and to understand how they relate to him and his world.

Beyond this, play also reveals to children that there are more ways of relating to others than what is already familiar to the child (i.e. beyond the child's current conception of familial and social relationships), and that the child has a *choice* in how he relates to others; the child has some say in whether the people he encounters will fit into the structure of his world or not, and, if they do, in what way and to what extent. Thus, as Winnicott (1964) notes, forming social bonds with others through play gives the child a means of fitting other children into their life in a way that is sensible and meaningful to them. In this way (and many others), play is largely an education in discovering new possibilities. Through play, children come to realize the vast possibilities that exist with respect to how we can choose to interact with others, what meaning we can give to those interactions, and the numerous ways in which we can fit other people into the structure of our own lives.

In other words, other children may first exist for the child only for their "utility" in the play-space—for their function as a component of the child's play, and part of what makes up and contributes to his play-space and the play-content that he works with. This is to say that other children may first be recognized as having a role in the child's life by first having a role in the play-space—for their *play-roles* (e.g. other children may first appear to fit into the child's world as "the red truck" when playing cars, the "daddy" when playing house, "the brick-layer" in game using LEGO, or as "the scary monster" in a game of fantasy make-believe). Coming to understand the purpose or function of other children within the context of the play-space acts as a middle ground or intermediary step through which the child can then come to find greater meaning to the existence of other children, and gradually come to find ways of socializing with and relating to other children *outside* of the play-space. What the child creates and learns in the play-space can always be extended beyond and into the child's regular life.

However, through play we learn much more than how to make sense of our relationships with others; play is largely an education in what it means to be an inherently intersubjective, social, free being who must necessarily share the world with other, similar beings. With respect to the relationship between play and social development, child psychologist Dorothy Singer says:

When children are playing, they are really learning about the world around them. They are taking the larger world and breaking it down into smaller [more manageable] parts by playing. They learn that you don't cheat, you have to be fair, and you have to be kind to your neighbor when you play. If you're going to be disruptive, you're going to be eliminated from the play game. They begin to

develop a sense of self: who I am, what is right, what is morally good.” (American Journal of Play, 2013, p. 12)

Children’s play-activities are often structured and controlled to some extent by various rules and boundaries that help make the game what it is. For example, play-games often involve turn-taking, sharing, teamwork, collaboration, and rules surrounding honesty. While the rules and boundaries that surround children’s play activities may appear to be relatively insignificant or as existing primarily to ensure that the activity or game is able to sustain itself, such rules and boundaries are often an education in what it takes to co-exist with others. This is to say that play experiences serve as an early introduction and sort of *practice* for the behaviours and attitudes that are necessary to co-exist with others as adults, and to form successful, healthy relationships with other people.

Play helps us learn important interpersonal skills that will be relevant and useful throughout our lives. For example, when children actually *enjoy* an activity, they are not likely to give up on it easily, and will often do their best to accommodate and compromise with their playmates so that the play-game may continue (Wenner, 2009, p. 2). In this way, play teaches us about perseverance and compromise, and about dedication to the commitments and projects that we undertake.

More subtly, perhaps, such play-experiences are also an education in the subjectivity of others. Through having disagreements and experiencing tension or conflict with others during play, we begin to realize that others have unique perspectives on the world and on who we are that may differ from our own. We must then begin to learn how to communicate effectively with others and to make decisions regarding how we will handle these differences in perspective. A part of this is coming to learn how others’ beliefs, values, and emotions fit into our own perspectives.

A rather natural part of playing with others is experiencing some level of *discomfort*. Not all of the child’s play-experiences may go smoothly, and play can often involve disagreement or encountering unfamiliar, potentially uncomfortable play-content. Learning how to handle this discomfort and figuring out what makes a certain experience uncomfortable in the first place is a part of the child’s self-discovery. Being able to play successfully with others may necessitate abandoning familiar ways of being or of relating to the world and others, and stepping outside of our “comfort zones.” Being ‘nudged’ into trying on these new ways of being and doing things

that may, at first, make us feel uncomfortable can ultimately lead us to discover new things about ourselves, what we like and don't like, and what we are capable of. This can ultimately facilitate self-discovery. First-order play allows us to practice relating to others in different ways, and gives us a chance to experiment with different roles. This helps us learn or come to better understand what particular roles and ways of relating to the world involve—it lets us “try on” different perspectives and may even help build *empathy* or a more profound understanding or consideration of others and their circumstances.

Similarly, as was noted earlier in our discussion, playing with others often involves the establishing of boundaries and guidelines that make the play-game possible. Such guidelines may include rules (whether implicit or explicit) about how the game is to be played, and what acts are acceptable or unacceptable within the context of the play-game. If one of our playmates disrespects the structure of the game, one of the rules, a personal boundary, or if she acts without consent, we can experience great discomfort. Such acts may be experienced as violatory (i.e. as violating the child, personally, or as violating the sanctity of the game or play-space). Thus, as we learn so much from play, we also learn about *personal boundaries* through playing with others; we learn what it means for a person to have such boundaries, what it feels like to disrespect or violate such boundaries, and what the potential consequences of breaching another person's boundaries are. Play also helps us learn how to handle having our own boundaries violated, and how to communicate our boundaries effectively in the first place. In play, we learn which actions we like or are okay with, and which we dislike or are not okay with, how to communicate these boundaries to others, how to enforce them, and how to react when our boundaries are not respected.¹²

¹² Learning to play (or learning to have any kind of relationship) with someone who is radically different or who has drastically different interests is going to provide some level of challenge and require some amount of active *effort* and “*work*.” While some level of discomfort is natural in play, an excess of discomfort may detract from the sense of play *as play*—as an experience that is relaxing, fun, and enjoyable, and that occurs organically and fluidly. In other words, if there is too much tension, conflict, disagreement, or discomfort in the child's play activity, then reaching a point of compromise becomes *too much work* and the activity we are engaging in with the other will no longer be *play*. After all, play must first and foremost be fun and enjoyable, and a play experience that is too uncomfortable could end up being *traumatic* or having a negative (as opposed to a positive) impact on a child's self-development. That playing with someone with a radically different perspective or personality potentially involves so much effort might explain why Wenner (2009) found that children prefer to play with individuals with similar interests or who are viewed as being similar in personality. However, again, what is

Play and the healthy expression of aggression. Similar to how play helps the child learn to deal with discomfort and develop the ability to compromise, Winnicott (1964) claims that children also play to express aggression (p. 143). The play-space affords children a safe environment in which they can fully experience and explore their aggression. This helps the child learn how to manage and express aggressive feelings in socially-acceptable, healthy ways (p. 143). Winnicott notes that other theorists talk about the child's expression of aggression as a matter of "getting rid of it" (i.e. as a matter of purging negative feelings) (p.143). This way of talking about aggression makes it seem as though aggressive feelings were some quantifiable, "bad" substance that must be disposed of (p.143). This, however, is not actually the case. On the contrary, Winnicott says that, while "pent-up resentment and the results of angry experience can feel to the child like bad stuff inside himself," aggression is ultimately a natural, experiential and emotional phenomenon that is not "bad" in and of itself (p. 143). Rather than trying to 'dispose of' or eliminate aggressive feelings, the child's goal should be to learn how to cope with, manage, and express such feelings in constructive and healthy ways. This is what the child is able to do through play.

In other words, aggression is not actually "some bad substance that could be got rid of," nor is this an accurate depiction of what the child's intent in bringing aggression into the play-space is (p. 143). Rather, Winnicott (1964) explains, it is more often the case that "the child values finding that hate or aggressive urges can be expressed in a known environment, without the return of hate and violence from the environment to the child" (p. 143). In other words, the child brings aggression into the play-space hoping that it will be *accepted* and tolerated by the play-space; the child expects to find himself in a situation where he is safe enough and free enough to practice expressing his aggression without facing negative consequences or punishment for doing so. Thus, good and healthy environments *tolerate* aggression and the child's attempts at expressing his aggression when it is expressed in a (more or less) acceptable form (p. 143). Aggression is a natural experience or feeling that is inherent to the child's existence as a person, and there stems from this a very real need for the child to be able to accept the presence of his aggressive feelings; the child needs, in at least some areas of his life, to feel

intended here is to illustrate that playing with others is an example of how playing is essentially a matter of dealing with reality.

comfortable admitting openly to being in possession of aggressive feelings, and to be able to express his aggression in a reasonable way. Winnicott says of this that “it must be accepted that aggression is there in the child’s make-up, and the child feels dishonest if what is there is hidden and denied” (p. 143). Making the child feel as though his aggressive feelings and urges are “bad,” or that he shouldn’t have them and that he is not allowed to express them, can ultimately be detrimental to the child’s self-development. Part of healthy self-development is coming to an understanding of one’s emotional capacity and how to relate to and express one’s emotions in healthy, constructive ways.

Winnicott (1964) highlights the conflict or tension that is inherent to the experience and expression of aggressive feelings. He does this in order to explain more clearly what it is that the child learns from expressing his aggression through play, and why the play-space is so important for developing a healthy relationship to one’s aggression. The primary tension inherent to feelings of aggression is that it can simultaneously be both *pleasurable* and *uncomfortable* to express aggression (p. 143). To the extent that feelings of aggression are experienced as something that calls for resolution or as an absence that needs to be filled, the expression of aggression is often experienced as pleasurable and as a relief. However, because the expression of aggressive feelings, whether imagined or actualized, often involves *violence*—the *hurting of someone or something*, it can also be experienced as uncomfortable; while the child does wish to express his aggression and resolve the inner-tension created by such feelings, he does not actually wish to hurt anyone (p. 143).

A big part of what the child is trying to learn or work out by bringing his aggression to the play-space is precisely how to express his aggressive feelings in a way that is honest and satisfying for him, but that does not cause himself or others any undue violence or harm. One of the initial ways of handling this conflict—of being able to enjoy the pleasure of expressing aggressive feelings without having to experience the discomfort of real or imagined violence—is by saving aggression and hatred for the play-space. By doing this, the child is able to act out his or her aggression in a more acceptable way, at a more acceptable time, and in an acceptable, safe space that is understanding and tolerant of the child’s feelings of aggression and his unique ways of expressing that aggression. The child is thus afforded the opportunity to practice different ways of managing and expressing his aggressive feelings. The child can then apply what he learns in the play-space to the rest of his life.

Saving aggressive feelings for expression in the play space also teaches the child *self-discipline*. The child learns not to express (as much of) his aggression in his day-to-day experience; he learns to *control* his desire to express his aggressive or angry feelings impulsively, and instead learns to express them in *play form* in the play-space. Thus, the child gradually develops the capacity and skill necessary to avoid expressing his anger and aggression immediately, at the moment when he first discovers his anger (p. 143). Of course, Winnicott (1964) stresses that mastering our aggression in this way is a *process*. While aggression can ultimately be channeled and used constructively, the ability to do this is something that is achieved *gradually* and over time. In the meantime, we must, says Winnicott, accept the child's aggression as it comes out and acknowledge the efforts that he makes to gain control and mastery over his aggression (even if he is not always fully successful in his efforts) (p.143).

Even when the child is successful in saving his aggressive feelings for expression in the play-space, it may be the case that he is not fully successful in expressing them in an appropriate way. When this happens, and as we witness the child's varyingly successful attempts to master and control his aggression, Winnicott says that, "It is our part to see that we do not ignore the social contribution the child makes by expressing his aggressive feeling in play instead of at the moment of rage" (pp. 143-144).

Psychologists Jerome and Dorothy Singer support Winnicott's claims, citing Freud's belief that children and adults alike "use imaginative thoughts and fantasies [like those found in imaginative play] as trial actions to restrain their impulses—in effect, to regulate their behaviour" (American Journal of Play, 2013, p. 7). In other words, the skills we develop through our childhood play are skills that we hold onto and make use of throughout our lives. The Singers conducted their own study to try to gauge the role of fantasy and creative play in managing aggression and other negative emotions. Their research findings suggest that "adults with test scores suggesting a fairly rich fantasy life were better able to control their movements and compulsive behaviors compared to others lacking such imaginations"¹³ (American Journal of Play, 2013, p. 7). The Singers' findings help demonstrate the relationship between childhood

¹³ It seems as though it would be important to keep in mind Winnicott's distinction between mere fantasy and *fantasy play*; fantasy alone is not enough to constitute play, and mere fantasy can prove detrimental both to an individual's grounding in shared reality and to an individual's ability to play creatively when fantasy is used in excess and without external expression.

fantasy play (i.e. creative, free play), self-control and self-development, situational adaptability, and the managing of negative or difficult emotions.

Play and the mastering of anxiety. Winnicott (1964) also argues that children play to master anxiety “or to master ideas and impulses that lead to anxiety if they are not in control” (p. 144). In fact, Winnicott claims that anxiety is *always* a factor in the play of children. While anxiety in the play of children occurs to varying degrees and has varying levels of impact on play, Winnicott argues that, in young children, anxiety is often a major factor in play (p. 144). When anxiety is present in small amounts and when it is not overwhelming in intensity, it does not have a negative impact on the child’s ability to play successfully and generally does not interfere with the child’s ability to enjoy play. In fact, the presence of anxiety in children’s play is often necessary and *beneficial*, as tolerable amounts of anxiety allow the child to work through and master the anxiety that they bring to the play-space (pp. 144-145).

However, an excess of anxiety can hinder or prevent the occurrence of successful, healthy play. Winnicott (1964) notes that the “[t]hreat of *excess* of anxiety leads to *compulsive play* or *repetitive play*, or to an exaggerated seeking for the pleasures that belong to play [my emphasis]” (p. 144). In these cases, the child’s anxiety becomes too great and overwhelming and has a negative impact on the child’s ability to play successfully or prevents the child from being able to play at all. In cases where play becomes too repetitive or compulsive, it is no longer free, creative, or fluid, and the child is thus prevented from being able to engage in genuine, free, healthy play. It may also be the case that the child becomes “trapped” in the compulsive play activity, becoming a “prisoner” of sorts to their own anxious play content and the compulsion to play out a particular scenario indefinitely. Similarly, when a child begins to seek out only the pleasures that belong to play, they are no longer capable of genuine play and they begin to relate to play as the means to an end (where the end goal of pleasure is more important than the means of the play experience itself), or the child’s play becomes like compulsive masturbation in that it becomes too external and disconnected from the child’s inner reality. For example, Winnicott

notes that, when the child's anxiety is far too great, play often "breaks down into pure exploitation of sensual gratification"¹⁴ (p. 144).

Nevertheless, anxiety is ultimately a necessary, healthy, beneficial component of play because the presence of manageable levels of anxiety affords the child an opportunity to *master their anxiety*. Winnicott argues that the mastery of anxiety is one of the most important features of play. This is, he says, largely because it demonstrates the critical importance of play to well-being and healthy functioning, and because it provides support for the argument that it is actually *necessary* for children to play and, thus, that it is *damaging* and *unhealthy* for us to prevent children from playing. Winnicott (1964) says:

For insofar as children only play for pleasure they can be asked to give it up, whereas insofar as play deals with anxiety, we cannot keep children from it without causing distress, actual anxiety, or new defenses against anxiety (such as daydreaming or masturbation). (p.144)

The mastering of anxiety through play may appear to be just one of several critically important benefits of play to the healthy self-development of children and the child's well-being more generally. However, it, on its own, already provides adequate reason to argue for play as a *necessary* component of the healthy self-development of children. If we were to deprive children of play, we would be depriving them of a comfortable, safe, self-directed and self-created space in which they can learn to manage, overcome, and repurpose individual anxieties. If anxiety is left unmanaged, not only does it prevent the child from being able to enjoy and succeed in play, but it inevitably impacts other areas of the child's life and prevents them from developing important skills (such as the management and mastery of anxiety) that benefit all aspects of their lives.

Winnicott's claim that play enables children to work through and master anxieties is well-supported by modern psychological theory. For example, child psychologists Dorothy and Jerome Singer argue that play can often be *compensatory*—that play is beneficial to the child in that it provides a realm in which the child can tend to and satisfy needs and desires that would be more difficult or impossible to address in reality (American Journal of Play, 2013, p.8). The child's fears, anxieties, and other difficult emotions are especially important for the child to

¹⁴ This way of relating to play can be compared to compulsive masturbation, where it is the pleasure of orgasm that is desired, and where the fantasy and process leading up to the final pleasurable moment are ignored (Winnicott, 1964, p. 145).

address through play. For example, the Singers say that the compensatory value of play can be seen in examples such as a child who “punishes” her teddy in order to come to terms with her own feelings of guilt, or a child who tends to her dolly’s imaginary “boo-boos” in order to work through her own conflicts with her caregivers. These play-activities serve as a form of “self-healing” for the child (American Journal of Play, 2013, p.8). As a more concrete example of genuine play that is compensatory, the Singers offer the following example: “We know that a child terrified by animals at the zoo will come home, take out her puppet, and play scary animal over and over until she feels better. So, sometimes play works out problems [that children are struggling with]” (American Journal of Play, 2013, p. 8). This use of play to help cope with difficult feelings and situations, and to master fear and anxiety is also supported by biological and evolutionary studies. Researchers note that “Animal studies also support the idea that play helps to alleviate stress—a concept known in neuro-science as social-buffering” (Wenner, 2009, p. 3).

Play can also be a critically important way for children to help cope with and work through more serious emotions and issues, such as phobias, trauma, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). To demonstrate this, the Singers offer the example of a child patient who was witness to a horrific murder at a very young age (American Journal of Play, 2013, p. 8). The murder that the child witnessed took place in her own home. The young girl’s preferred play-game was “dollhouse,” and in her solo play involving the dollhouse, the girl would repeatedly play out the same scenario: one room in the dollhouse was always blocked off, barricaded, and avoided by the girl and the dolls in the dollhouse. However, with time and through persisting in her play, the girl was eventually able to open the door to that room and rescue a child-sized doll that had been trapped inside the whole time (American Journal of Play, 2013, p. 8). Initially, while playing the girl was trying to hide the room, avoid it, or erase its existence altogether. By persisting in her play, however, the girl was eventually able to accept the existence of the room (i.e. to accept her trauma and the reality of what she had faced), enter the room, and carry out the significant play action of rescuing the child-sized doll trapped within the room. The saving of the child-doll inside was akin to the freeing or saving of the child herself.

Play benefits children psychologically and emotionally by affording them a space and a means for coping with and conquering their fears and anxieties. In and through play, children are able to work through traumas, fears, and worries, and to come to terms with difficult situations in

their day-to-day lives. Dorothy and Jerome Singer argue that self-directed fantasy play and games of make-believe always have a positive (or neutral) impact on children. The Singers argue there is no potential for such self-directed, imaginative play activities to increase a child's fears of anxieties (American Journal of Play, 2013, p. 8). The Singers argue that fantasy play always has the opposite effect on children. Their primary reason for believing this is that, according to them, "children only play what they have control over" (American Journal of Play, 2013, p. 8). Children can reduce fear through imaginative play-games, such as playing out a scene with a scary monster over and over until they are no longer afraid or the monster is no longer scary. In this way, play helps children feel more *confident*. On this matter, Dorothy Singer says, "It gives them [children] mastery over the fear. Through imaginative play, they become the ones in control" (American Journal of Play, 2013, p. 8). This point about the child developing confidence and benefiting from a sense of being in control relates back to our earlier point about how genuine, creative acts of play afford the child a sense of agency and freedom that the child does not (always or necessarily) get to experience in the rest of their daily living.

However, it should be noted that interpersonal play (i.e. play that involves more than one individual) holds the potential to *increase* the child's anxiety levels. The Singers are able to arrive at the conclusion that play always has a positive impact on a child's anxiety levels because they have focused on self-directed, self-determined play. This is to say that it is only accurate to say that play will always have a neutral or positive impact on a child's anxiety levels if the following assumptions are made: (a) that play is always solitary or that the child is unaffected by the play content of other players; (b) that the play content introduced will always be the child's own content; (c) that the child will always be able to handle or master play content that is introduced; and (d) that the child will have conscious control over the play content. Unfortunately, these things are not always the case and are just some of the factors that can contribute to play "failing," and, thus, potentially *increasing* a child's anxiety.

However, it is also possible that, while the child may experience a temporary increase in anxiety, the child will ultimately still be able to master that anxiety through continued play, just as they would in solo or entirely self-determined play. Additionally, interpersonal play holds the potential to help the child overcome, deal with, or grow to understand his or her worries, anxieties, fears, or other concerns in ways that they could not have on their own. For example, we could consider two children, Shinji and Louise, who are playing a game of make-believe

together. Everything is going smoothly until Shinji introduces an anxious piece of play-content into the play-space. The particular anxiety that is introduced is one that Shinji has not been able to master on his own and that he has been struggling with. It is possible that Louise could then introduce her own play-content into the play-space as a solution to Shinji's anxiety, thus helping Shinji work through the anxiety that he was difficulty overcoming on his own. In other words, play also affords the child an opportunity to work together with others to make sense of and overcome his fears and anxieties. By working together with his playmate, the child may be able to see his concerns in a new way or come up with a solution that he wouldn't have been able to on his own. To make this example clearer, let's say that Shinji has been experiencing anxiety surrounding sleeping on his own. This anxiety has manifested in the form of an over-concern with the (supposed or imagined) existence of intrusive "monsters" that live under his bed and in his closet. While playing in his bedroom with Louise, Shinji introduces to the play-area the idea that there is a scary monster under the bed and that he and Louise are the only ones who can defeat it. Shinji adds that there is, however, no known way to defeat the monster. Un-phased by this proposition, Louise proposes that a new way to defeat this type of monster has just been discovered, comes up with a plan to defeat the monster, and manages to convince Shinji that her plan is successful in defeating the monster. By working together with Louise, Shinji has now taken a step towards working through his anxiety surrounding sleep by becoming capable of defeating the symbol of his fear.

2.1.3 Conclusion

In summary, what this section has argued for is the claim that positive play experiences during childhood are a critical and necessary part of healthy self-development. In fact, this paper contends that such instances of childhood play precisely *are* the child's project of self-development; free, self-directed, creative play precisely *is* self-formation and self-discovery. In trying to support these claims, more specific examples of the ways in which play contributes to self-development have been given. First, it was noted that play helps to facilitate the unification of the child's personality, and the blending of the internal and external realms of experience. In and through play the child gains an understanding of the boundaries between self and other, the subjective and the objective, and the internal and the external, and learns how to bring them together in the unity of experience.

It was then argued that, because genuine play is free, creative, self-directed, and involves the creative use of objects (what Winnicott calls *object-use*), it serves as an education in our own subjectivity, agency, freedom, responsibility, and our other powers and abilities. Through playing the child begins to learn what it means to be a free subjectivity who is responsible for his own decisions. By coming to learn about his subjectivity and agency the child is essentially learning about reality and figuring out how to navigate it.

Next, we examined how play allows the child to exist in a state of formlessness, meaning that the child is able to deconstruct and reconstruct the self as he or she sees fit, and to exist without presumption, purpose, or obligation. This formlessness allows for deeper self-exploration and the entertaining of the many possibilities that exist for the child.

We then noted that play contributes greatly to the socialization of the child, and serves as an education in the subjectivity and agency of others. That is, play helps us come to understand the ‘otherness’ of others, teaches us about the differences in perspective that exist between subjects, and helps us figure out how to co-exist with the other in new and meaningful ways. Through play we learn how to make sense of our place in the other’s world and vice versa, we learn to compromise and share, and we learn to be empathetic and compassionate.

It was then argued that play serves as an arena in which the child can express and work through their aggressive feelings, helping the child learn how to manage unpleasant emotions and, with practice, to express aggressive feelings in healthy, constructive, socially-acceptable ways. This ability to practice at feeling and expressing their own emotional states ultimately helps children make sense of their emotional lives and learn to communicate what they are feeling.

Finally, it was asserted that children are able to work through and overcome both general and particular anxieties through their play; play helps the child conquer individual fears, worries, anxieties, and day-to-day concerns. Having a safe space in which to make themselves vulnerable and deal with their deepest worries ultimately serves to help the child grow psychologically and develop healthy ways of coping with anxiety.

Thus, through these examples and numerous others, we can conclude that, far from being disconnected from reality, play helps the child cope and engage more fully with reality, and enables us to come to see the multitude of possibilities that are inherent to reality. Reality is

comprised of these countless possibilities and play allows the child to come to see the world (and the self) as it actually is: indeterminate, ambiguous, and filled with possibility.

2.2 Part Two: Play as an inherently intersubjective phenomenon or project:

Aside from essentially being a matter of self-development, play is inherently and fundamentally *intersubjective*. Chapter One of this project argued that the self and our experience of the world are inherently intersubjective. More specifically, it was explained that communication is an example of a critically important, inherently intersubjective phenomenon (that also contributes to our self-development). Following from these arguments and from the above section on play, it is now being argued that play, like linguistic communication, is inherently and necessarily intersubjective; play is a phenomenon that clearly demonstrates our inherent interrelatedness with others, and the multitude of ways in which others, whether profoundly or subtly, pattern and shape the fabric of our experience and influence our sense of who we are.

The first major way in which we can see the intersubjective nature of play revealed is in the fact that the individual's capacity for play is dependent on the child's relationship with the mother and the mother's ability to be 'good-enough.' More specifically, the child's ability to engage in free, creative play is dependent on the successful separation of the infant from the mother and the success of the weaning process as a whole, including the successful development of the transitional area.

Winnicott (1971) explains how the individual's capacity for play is something that develops out of the *transitional area of experience* that opens up between the infant and the mother during the infantile weaning process. Recall that this area that opens up is not a literal "space" or "gap." Rather, it is a *potential area* that represents the distinction between the "me" and the "not-me," the subjective and the objective, the personal and the shared. As we have seen, the infant's identity is, for the first several months of life, indistinct from the mother's. The infant sees himself as one with the mother and views her and the environment as things that he has omnipotent control over.

When this state of illusion begins to come to an end, however, the infant begins to realize that he is in fact something separate and distinct from everything else. In order to soothe himself during this traumatic process and to close the gap that now exists between the me and the not-me, the infant usually takes up a transitional object that he simultaneously views as distinct from himself but also somehow under his control. That is, the transitional object is neither fully separate from the infant nor fully united with him. Use of a transitional object and of the transitional space is something that can only occur if the mother is able to be a “good-enough mother”—to successfully allow her baby the illusion of omnipotent control over the world and unification with her, and to then successfully disillusion him by gradually adapting less and less to his needs and treating him as a distinct individual.

One of the primary reasons why the mother’s ability to be good enough and the infant’s subsequent ability to experience and use the transitional area are so important is because the transitional area is the space where play occurs. Winnicott (1964) describes the process of the development for the capacity to play as involving several stages (pp. 63-65). First, as has been mentioned, the infant and the object (i.e. the objective world) are *merged*. In this stage, the infant is incapable of perceiving objects objectively, and the mother performs the role of ensuring that what the infant is looking for and ready to find is “made actual” and presented to him (e.g. when the infant is hungry, the mother’s breast or a bottle appears magically in front of him) (Winnicott, 1971, p.64). In other words, the infant’s experience of reality is at first *subjective*.

The next stage that Winnicott identifies is initiated by the object’s (i.e. the objective world’s and the mother’s) *failure*. Up until this point, the infant has possessed a sense of omnipotent control over the world. This was possible because the mother adapted herself so closely to the infant’s needs and desires, playing along with the infant’s subjective experience of the world. However, as the weaning process intensifies, the infant begins to experience the failure of the world. Thus, as a result of the object’s failure, the object is rejected by the infant (Winnicott, 1971, p. 63). This rejection of the object is, however, followed by a re-acceptance of the object that allows the infant to gradually become capable of perceiving the object objectively, as it actually is in its own reality. In other words, the infant rejects his initial interpretation of the object and establishes a new understanding of the object; he amends his subjective interpretation in favor of a more realistic one. This process is, again, dependent on the ability of the mother to be “good-enough.” Winnicott explains:

In the state of confidence that grows up when a mother can do this difficult thing well (not if she is unable to do it), the baby begins to enjoy experiences based on a 'marriage' of the omnipotence of intrapsychic processes with the baby's control of the actual. Confidence in the mother makes an intermediate playground here, where the idea of magic originates, since the baby does to some extent *experience* omnipotence. [...] I call this a playground because play starts here. The playground is a potential space between the mother and the baby or joining mother and baby. (pp. 63-64)

Thus, whether the infant becomes capable of play is dependent on the mother's ability to give her child this initial illusion of omnipotent control, and her consistent and meaningful participation in the process of disillusionment. The child's eventual disillusionment offers the child a middle-ground in which he can retain some of his omnipotence, but in which he is exercising his control over *actually-existing* objects and transforming their meaning.

This process of rejection, re-orientation, and re-acceptance of the objective world is necessary for the child to be capable of object-use; for the child to be able to alter the meaning of objects and use them creatively, he must first have some understanding of what the object actually is, and an understanding that the object is not entirely subjectable to his will, and must also retain the capacity to enter a state where he believes in his power to manipulate the meaning of objects and bend them to his will.

The process of the child's development of the capacity for play continues with the child reaching a stage where he is capable of being alone in the presence of others. The theme of *reliability* remains critically important at this stage; the child's ability to play in the presence of others is largely dependent on the child's perception of the reliability of those around him, and especially of the mother figure. To play, the child must first have a sense that the people who he must depend on are reliable and trustworthy, and that they will continue to exist and be available to the child even after absence has been experienced (Winnicott, 1971, p. 64). This perception of the reliability of others contributes to the child's sense of safety and security, both of which are necessary for play to occur. Winnicott (1971) summarizes this stage by saying that the child who has become capable of playing alone in the presence of others "is now playing on the basis of the assumption that the person who loves and who is therefore reliable is available and continues to be available when remembered after being forgotten. This person is felt to reflect back what happens in the play" (p, 64).

The final stage that Winnicott (1971) identifies sees the child becoming ready to engage in mutual play with others. At this stage, the child is capable of both permitting and enjoying the overlapping of two distinct play areas (p. 64). The mother is typically the infant's first playmate and she is, at the beginning, careful to mirror and reciprocate the play activities of the child (i.e. she plays *his games* in *his way*). However, the mother will eventually begin to introduce new ways of playing—*her ways* of playing. While infants vary in their capacity to accept and enjoy the introduction of play material that is not their own, it seems to be this gradual introduction of foreign play content that enables the child to become capable of playing with others. Winnicott notes that, once this stage has been accomplished, “the way is paved for a playing together in a relationship” with another person (p. 64).

Thus, we can see that individual capacity for play is largely dependent on the successful development of the transitional space, and that the development of the transitional space is primarily dependent on environmental conditions and personal relationships that are favorable to the individual child, especially regarding parental attitude and practice. In this way, then, we can already see how and why it is the case play is necessarily intersubjective; even the child's capacity for play is itself owed to his relations with others.

Because parental provision and reliability are such critical factors in determining whether or not a child will become capable of playing well (or at all), children who are deprived or abused in the early stages of development may not develop the capacity for play, or their ability to use the transitional space may be greatly hindered and limited. It is through a successful early relationship with the mother that an infant is able to experience the emergence of a self that is distinct from the mother and the rest of the objective world. For an infant to *use* objects, there must both be a functional *self* and a world of actually-existing, external objects. The child must have a grasp on both the subjective and objective modes of experiencing, and must be capable of uniting the actual use of external reality with fantasy and other such creative mental content.

It has been explained that object-use is an important component of play and is the process by which an individual alters or changes entirely the meaning of an external object to be used in a novel way (i.e. for pots and pans to appear as a drum set, or for a teddy bear to appear as a doctor's patient). If a child's environment or his mother fail him, the child may become incapable of the creative use of objects altogether, may fill the transitional space with his own fantasies (as was the case with Patient X), or will have his transitional space filled up with the

content of others (meaning that it would be defined by someone else, and the space would no longer be *his*) (Winnicott, 1971, Ch. 7).

We can once again consider Winnicott's (1971) Patient X. As a child, patient X never achieved the unification of the subjective and object, the internal and external, and self and other; she never grew to understand the ways in which the two are intimately intertwined, or, rather, we could say that she never become capable of intertwining them in her own lived experience. Based on Winnicott's description, it seems as though Patient X experienced the threat of having her transitional area filled with the content and expectations of others, namely her siblings. It appears that Patient X's way of trying to "take back" or "reclaim" her transitional area was to fill it up with an excess of her own fantasy content; her way of coping with this hostile occupation of her own creative space, and the sense of a lack of control over her own identity and her life was to build a magical world inside of herself within which she could exert total control.

Winnicott (1971) explains that Patient X experienced difficulty during the weaning process, during which disillusionment and the separation of mother and child occur (p. 40). Specifically, he explains that Patient X tried to cling to her omnipotence; she tried to maintain a sense of omnipotent control over her environment through her constant dissociative fantasy. Winnicott says that Patient X was "keeping up a continuity of fantasizing in which omnipotence was retained and wonderful things could be achieved in a dissociative state" (p. 40).¹⁵ We will recall that it was this fantasy that prevented her from being able to play and live creatively.

Continuing with the discussion of the development of the child's capacity for play, it can be noted that there is another widely-recognized stage of childhood play that could be added to Winnicott's list: before playing *with* other children and after the child has become capable of playing alone, the child must first pass through a stage of play known as *parallel play*. Parallel play is essentially a situation in which multiple children play together in a shared space, or even

¹⁵ Note that Winnicott (1971) mentions in a footnote that Patient X's brand of adulthood omnipotence is not identical to the omnipotence experienced by the infant in the earliest stages of development (p. 40). The primary difference that Winnicott notes is that the infant's omnipotence is one founded in genuine dependence, while Patient X's brand of omnipotence stems from "hopelessness about dependence" (p.40, ft. 4). Despite their differences, it could be argued that, motivation aside, they at least appear to be a very similar mechanisms; it seems as though Patient X's omnipotence is an extension of (or, perhaps, a replacement for) her (lost) infantile omnipotence.

side-by-side, but where they do not directly interact with one another or interfere in each other's play activities (American Journal of Play, 2013, p. 5).

Even though the children involved in parallel play are not actually playing *together*, children are likely to become upset, distracted from their own play, or entirely incapable of playing if another child is removed from the play space (American Journal of Play, 2013, p. 5). This is to say that the mere *presence* of another individual can be enough to instigate, permit, encourage, or facilitate play. This again demonstrates the way in which play is always and inherently intersubjective. That the mere presence of potential playmates could have such a significant impact on the child's way of playing and ability to play is demonstrative of the ways in which playing is one of the child's primary means of figuring out how to exist with and alongside others, how to relate to others and integrate them into their own worlds, and to figure out what the self is in light of the existence of others. The presence, gaze, or mood of another child can enable or hinder the child's own play—it can permit it, encourage it, and help drive it forward, or it can reject it, disrupt it, and prevent it from occurring.

The American Journal of Play (2013) also notes that imitative behaviour is often seen in the parallel play of young children (p. 5). At this very young age, children learn a great deal through imitation in their lives more generally; children learn how to speak and behave largely (if not primarily) through paying attention to and copying what they see others doing. Before our play-areas and perspectives on the world can overlap and merge, they first grow closer together, touching at the edges and brushing up against one another. While children at this stage of development may not yet be capable of sharing their transitional space and play content with another person directly, their own play is nevertheless influenced by the others that play alongside them; children perceive the various ways in which their almost-playmates play and interact with the world. Because the play of children is still largely imitative at this stage, the play of perceivable others not only has an influence on the child's ability to play, but also on *what* and *how* the child plays; the play content and behaviours of other children shape the child's own play-content and play-patterns.

Considering this example of parallel play and what it means to truly play *with* another person, it can be said that genuine play is *a form of communication* and that it opens up a special place for authentic communication to take place. More specifically, it can be noted that genuine acts of play encourage and involve a notable amount of what Merleau-Ponty referred to as *first-*

order speech—speech that is authentic, transcendental, and that brings into being new meaning. In fact, it can be argued that genuine acts of play are themselves acts of *first-order communication*.¹⁶

Playing with others necessarily involves communication. Communication is necessary to ensure that playmates understand each other and the play-games they are sharing in, and can be an important means of advancing games and sharing in each other's perspectives.

It seems like common sense knowledge to say that play involves and facilitates communication in children. After all, modern studies have revealed time and again that play (especially play with others) helps children develop a *vocabulary* (American Journal of Play, 2013, p. 6). Of course, interpersonal play involves a great deal of *communication*, and language is one of the many things that children often imitate in play. As in the case of parallel play, the child need not be playing directly with another child in order to imitate the other child's communicative behaviours; just being in the same room as other speaking children can be enough to facilitate the imitation, learning, and use of verbal communication. The use of language in play helps us develop a basic vocabulary, and allows us to experiment with additions and alterations to our existing lexicon. Furthermore, children who play regularly with other children often have more advanced vocabularies than those who do not. Studies have also found that "children use more sophisticated language when playing with other children than when playing with adults" (Wenner, 2009, p. 2). In Merleau-Ponty's terms, playing with other children ultimately increases the child's reserves of second-order language and encourages us to engage in first-order communication.

While children are sometimes able to successfully engage in mutually-rewarding acts of play without explicitly stating their intentions and explaining their ideas, this is not always the case. Field et al. (1982) argue that, at least some of the time, announced fantasy play is *necessary* for play participants to understand a particular action or set of actions *as play* (p. 508). In other

¹⁶ In previous drafts of this paper, it was argued that play can be broken down into two distinct categories or types of play that reflect Merleau-Ponty's categories of first- and second-order speech. The first type of play was referred to as *second-order play* and encompasses play activities that are more highly-structured, less creative, and that involve less freedom (e.g. games like soccer, chess, or Monopoly). The second type of play was referred to as *first-order play* and encompasses play activities that meet Winnicott's criteria of being free, creative, self-directed, and that contribute more meaningfully to self-development (e.g. games of fantasy and make-believe). It was argued that second-order play can act as a "stepping stone" or as "building blocks" that help enable the child to engage in acts of first-order play, similar to how second-order language serves as a foundation for first-order language. This idea will be taken up and expanded in a separate work.

words, for a particular activity or game to be understood as play by all participants (and, therefore, to actually *be* play), it must first be framed by some communicative gesture that delivers the message “this is play” (Field et al, 1982, 508). This is to say that, for children to be able to play together successfully, it must sometimes be expressed explicitly that what is occurring or is about to occur is an act of play.

Because each of us is a unique individual with a unique perspective, the experience of playing together with another individual allows for the possibility of personal enrichment and growth. This is because playing with another person entails an overlap between individual play areas and perspectives, and this overlap allows for the introduction of new content and the removal of personal obstructions that might not have been possible otherwise. This is similar to Merleau-Ponty’s idea of the way in which our perspectives unite or overlap when we engage in reciprocal communication with others. Play is an excellent facilitator of communication. It allows for abstract communication that might not be possible through speech, affords individuals an opportunity to represent the self in novel ways or ways that may not be socially acceptable outside of the play space, can allow us the sense of freedom and security to convey difficult messages to each other, and serves to bring individuals closer together, allowing them to bond and develop a stronger sense of connectedness.

Play that involves another person (or other people) is necessarily a form of communication or way of communicating with the other(s) being played with. If two or more people are not in communication with another or are incapable of communicating, then they cannot play in the first place. Because play *is* communication with others (and/or with the self, objects, concepts, or other content, whether real or fictional), it necessarily involves a *coalition*, *merging*, *blending*, or *overlap* in perspectives that is similar to the overlapping of perspectives that we find in linguistic communication. This merging of perspectives is, in Winnicott’s terms, the overlap of the playmates transitional areas and the reciprocal sharing of play-content.

However, there is a difference between *play* and *speech* (as forms of communication) that should be noted: play does not merely allow us to come to understand another person by allowing us to see into or share in their perspective and for them to share in ours. Rather, play allows us to actually try to *be* a particular other in a way that speech does not, and it also allows us to open a richer, more diverse communal space (or perspective) that is *created* together. In play, we do not simply *talk about* our feelings, ideas, emotions, sense of self, the possibilities

that we are working to make sense of and struggling to actualize. Rather, in play we can actually *be* these things that we think about and feel, we can express our emotions, and actually create and act upon new possibilities. We could say that play is more *involved* than mere speech (i.e. it involves more of the individual than mere speech). Play is also less restricted (by rules and previous meanings, etc.) than speech, and offers the child a broader multitude of ways to exist and express himself. The use of language is heavily regulated and controlled, and, to communicate effectively, children are encouraged to all speak the same language in (more or less) the same way in their day-to-day lives. In contrast to this, the child's potential opportunities for play are much more vast and diverse, and play itself offers the child a forum in which he can use language more creatively (without the pressure of having someone regulating his use of common, second-order terminology). In other words, play allows us to *inhabit* the perspective of the other in a different way from mere speech.

For example, a child can *talk* with mommy about the responsibilities, difficulties, and stresses of parenting and running a household, but the child may learn something new or profound and, at the very least, something *different*, through actually *playing at being mommy*—through playing and performing the role of a mother—as in games of “house” or in role-reversal play with the child's mother. While the experience of “being a mother” in play is, of course, importantly different from actually being a mother (especially when a child is playing at being a mother), if the child is met with resistance, complication, or stress in the play experience of being a mother, they may come to better appreciate or understand mommy's role and her responsibilities, and how the child's behaviors impact mommy, and so on.

Again, using the example of imaginative role-playing, if two or more children come together to play a game of house, the play space that is created is one that is shared and inhabited by all the players and that is filled with the content that each player contributes. In other words, in this sort of play an *entirely new perspective is created* by the players—one that transcends and is distinct from each player's own, personal perspective, and the inhabitation of this new, shared perspective is a distinct experience from the sharing of perspectives that occurs in speech.

Field, Stefano, and Koewler (1983) note that:

[I]n order to pretend to be someone else, the child must step into or adapt to the perspective of another while retaining his or her self-perspective. The child must control the perspective of “me”

being “me as her or him.” The child is thus credited with the capacity for recursive reasoning. (p. 507)

Essentially, several things that occur in genuine acts of play are being described here. First, Field et al. (1983) pick up on the fact that children share in each other’s perspectives in instances of genuine, reciprocal play. Again, in communicating with the other and opening up a shared space in which our perspectives meet and overlap, we are able to access some of the perspective of the other without ever actually abandoning our own, limited self-perspective. We cannot ever fully escape or abandon our unique perspective because it is our hold on the world—the point of view from which all life occurs for us. However, it must also be understood that, in spite of this, we are still intimately related to others and that we have the power to make contact with them and to access their perspectives on the world. Secondly, this passage highlights and emphasizes the way in which all experience is defined or, at the very least, influenced by our own perspective, self-definition, and understanding of the world; everything that we perceive and experience is filtered through the lens of our own perspective, our own, unique hold on the world. This is why, as the passage explains, when we pretend to be someone else, we are never actually *being someone else*. Rather, we are *being ourselves as someone else*. However, because we are always caught up in and shaped by our interactions and relationships with the others, the self is itself informed by others.

This account of play reveals to us that childhood play is also essentially a matter of the child discovering and working at making sense of our intersubjectivity; it is through play that the child grapples with and practices at distinguishing between self and other, and relating the self to the other and vice versa. Through play, the child learns how to hold onto himself while nevertheless becoming capable of letting go of or seeing past his own perspective so that he may share in the perspective of another person.

Quite simply, play provides the individual with more diverse opportunities for creative and authentic self-expression than language does on its own. In play, the child can make use of their body, various objects and tools, environments, fantasy and dream content, and the play-content of others in order to express themselves and communicate with the other. Play affords the child a space with enough room for him to be free and creative beyond what is possible in his day-to-life, as well as providing the child with the means necessary to make use of that space.

Of course, play is also (and importantly) a way of *communicating with the self*. Through play the child can bring to light, make sense of, and work through difficult concepts, ideas, and emotions. Through playing with the others, the child is provided an opportunity to discover new things about himself for the first time, and to communicate those new discoveries to himself and to others. As with first-order speech, it may only be in trying to communicate something to the other that the child is able to fully realize what it is that he is trying to communicate; the child may not know exactly what meaning it is that needs to be communicated until he has actually communicated it. As was noted in the section on speech, we often experience having a certain *sense* of something that is not yet fully formed or concrete, and it is often only once we have communicated that sense (or in the process of communicating it) that we realize for the first time what the certain “sense” actually is and what meaning it has for us.

In the same way that it is communicative, play is also expressive—it can be a powerful and rich way of representing the self and engaging in *self-expression*. Winnicott (1964) says that, because of this, “Play can be ‘a being honest about oneself,’ just as dressing can be for an adult” (p. 146). Adults attempt to represent themselves and tell the world something about who they are through the ways in which they make use of clothing and accessories. Winnicott notes that the child is doing something very similar in play; through his play, the child conveys a certain message about who he is—what kind of person he is—to the world and the others around him (p. 146). In play, the child is free to exist honestly; he can present himself and express himself *as himself*. Winnicott notes that such honest presentations of the self are especially common among very young children. He says that this is because, at such a young age, children cannot help but be *honest* in their representations and in their play content (p. 146).¹⁷

Conclusion. Play is *always* an intersubjective phenomenon, regardless of whether we are playing alone or with others. As we learned in Chapter One, our entire existence is

¹⁷ Winnicott (1964) notes that the reason why very young children cannot help but be honest in their play is because *dishonesty* is a skill that is learned gradually (and at different times and to varying degrees) as the child ages and gains experience (p. 64). Winnicott notes that, just as the child learns how to *lie* through his linguistic communications, the child who learns how to be dishonest becomes capable of lying through or in his playing. Thus, Winnicott notes that the initial honesty that is found in the play of very young children “can be changed at an early age into its opposite, for play, like speech, can be said to be given to us to hide our thoughts, [especially] if it is the deeper thoughts that we mean” (p.146). Thus, children can learn to be dishonest in play or to *play dishonestly*, just as they can learn to tell lies through speech.

intersubjective; we are, by nature, intersubjective beings whose lives are always intimately intertwined with the existence and lives of other people. Play, as a phenomenon that is both communicative and social, is a particularly rich example of this interrelatedness. As we saw in our examination of Winnicott's (1971) account of infantile development and individual formation of the transitional area of experience, other people (namely our primary caregivers) play a very important role in determining whether we will become capable of healthy, genuine play. Our earliest relationships are thus largely responsible for the successful (or unsuccessful) development of the transitional area of experience where all play takes place, and for development of the capacity to use objects creatively. This is the most basic sense in which play is an intersubjective phenomenon.

The particular ways in which we become capable of playing are also highly influenced by the particular others who surround us in our formative years. Because we are particularly dependent on others for permission when we are very young, when, where, and how we play is inevitably shaped by the attitudes, beliefs, projects, and priorities of those around us. For example, one child may find herself being raised by parents who are very strict and overbearing, and who have very busy schedules with many commitments. As a result, this child may find that opportunities for free and genuine play are scarce, and that there are few ways in which she is *allowed* to play. Our reliance on the permission and preferences of others does not cease.

It is not just that the child's ability to play and opportunities for play that are shaped and determined by others. Naturally, because our caregivers, relatives, and other intimately-related others are the first people that we play with, the form and content of our playful endeavors are likely to be shaped by their own play preferences. For example, one child may find himself in a family that favors board games and puzzles, while another may find herself surrounded by relatives who prefer playing outdoors, and yet another may find herself with a parent who is especially fond of playing imaginative games, like make-believe and dress-up. While it may not always be the case that children will end up preferring the same ways of playing as their close others, their own play will nevertheless be influenced by it. For example, it may end up being the case that, because the people who are available for the child to play with prefer these games, the child has little to no opportunities to play any differently, or that the child comes to think of familial ways of playing as the "normal" ways of playing and, as a result, does not end up exploring other possibilities. If a child spends too much time playing the games that are preferred

by those who are closest to them, along with those play types becoming normalized, there is a risk that the child simply will not have time to explore other ways of playing.

Of course, we can see how play is an intersubjective phenomenon most explicitly in the fact that play is often a shared, *social* experience—children do not always play alone and often play with other individuals, such as family members, teachers and caregivers, and with friends and schoolmates. Play is something that is shared with others and that occurs between individuals. There is thus much interrelating and communication that occurs in shared play. When we are playing with others, we are communicating with them through the play itself, and we are also often communicating on a more direct, verbal level. In playing with others, we must connect with them and create the room that is necessary to accommodate their play content and play preferences, and mesh them together with our own. In successful instances of play, we achieve a union with the other that unites our unique perspectives on the world. In a way, play takes us out of ourselves and enables us to establish a new way of being in which we are sharing ourselves with another person, coming together in order to bridge the gap between self and other.

Even if a young child is playing alone, they may be doing so under the gaze of their watchful parents or surrounded by strangers (as in a park). While play takes place in the unique and personal transitional area of experiencing, the transitional area is itself situated within a broader, shared reality to which we always, to some extent, remain answerable. Whether we are relying on some other to provide a safe space to play with or toys for us to use, on our parents to give us permission, or on playmates to engage with us and help enrich our play space (there are, after all, many games that simply cannot be played alone or that would not be as rich and rewarding if they were to be played alone), whether we are actually playing with others, playing in the presence of others, or engaging in private solitary play, the nature, form, and content of our play, as well as our attitudes towards play and what we are able to achieve in and through it, will always be in some way shaped by our numerous relationships (past and present) with others, and on our interpersonal situatedness within the world. Thus, even the child playing alone in her bedroom is to some extent playing according to others; there is no aspect of the self that is not touched by the halo of intersubjectivity that envelops human life.

While it is certainly true that our ability to play and the form and content of our play are profoundly influenced and shaped by others, these are not the most important ways in which play is intersubjective. As was demonstrated in our examination of the ways in which play contributes

to self-development, play is essentially a way of making sense of the self, one's place in the world, and one's relations with others. Play is how the child first discovers how to *be with others*, and how to fit them into the narrative of his life; it is an ongoing dialogue between the developing self and all that is other. This is seen rather clearly even when considering the most basic and foundational components of Winnicott's (1971) arguments for the self being an intersubjective process of self-development. In particular, we can see how play is a matter of making sense of the self-other dynamic in Winnicott's assertion that the transitional area develops out of the infant's need to make sense of the ongoing realization that he and his mother are distinct beings. It is no coincidence that play occurs in the transitional area of experience; the child's play is precisely the continuing development of the realization that there is an objective world imbued with 'otherness,' and his ongoing work to make sense of the connection between the self, others, and the shared world. Precisely because play is this kind of activity—one that stems from our relationships with others and that strives to help us make sense of those relationships—it is inconceivable to think of play as wholly separate and removed from our interrelatedness with others. Thus, it is the case that play is always an intersubjective phenomenon.

2.3 Part Three: Risk, Failure, and Disconfirmation in Play

Following from the claims that play is necessarily a matter of self-development and that it is an inherently intersubjective phenomenon, this section will argue that our play experiences can have a very real and significant impact on us. Because of its potential to negatively impact self-development, play (and the child's need for play) needs to be taken seriously. When we slip into the mindset of thinking of play as something optional and insignificant, we lose sight of what play really is and how much it contributes to a child's development, and we risk causing our children our harm. Thus, this section focuses on instances where play *fails* (e.g. fails to be healthy, free, creative, self-directed, or honest) or becomes traumatic. While play can be (and often is) an extremely rewarding, self- and world-enriching experience for children, it is not without its own dangers and risks, and not all attempts at play are "successful." To illustrate how play can fail and the profound impact that it can have on the individual, this section will examine

the role of R. D. Laing's notion of *confirmation* in play and consider the potential consequences of experiencing profound *disconfirmation* while at play.

While play can have many benefits, not all instances of play are healthy or “successful,” and there are different ways in which play can “fail.” Uncomfortable experiences like those of conflict, disagreement, and tension are normal aspects of interpersonal play, and not all play experiences or attempts at play will be satisfying and rewarding for the child. In this sense, failed play is a normal part of human experience. While most cases of failed play are not likely to be severe, some can be. That some experiences of play will be more impactful than others is a conjecture that is consistent with Laing's (1961) observation that disconfirmation does not usually have a lasting impact, but, when it comes to schizogenic traits, it can be profoundly influential.

Genuine acts of play necessarily involve vulnerability and risk. Like any form of authentic communication with another person, we necessarily make ourselves *vulnerable* when we play with others—this is the case with any kind of interpersonal relationship. By creating and opening up a shared play-space with another person we are exposing ourselves—we are opening ourselves and our world up to the content, perspective, opinions, thoughts, and feelings of another person. Because we make ourselves vulnerable in play, we can experience hurt, betrayal, judgment, and violation. However, it is only by making ourselves vulnerable in this way that we are able to engage in authentic acts of play at all. Making ourselves vulnerable is always a *risk* of sorts; we cannot communicate authentically with another person without making ourselves vulnerable, but by making ourselves vulnerable we risk being hurt, violated, or betrayed.

In interpersonal play, we must necessarily communicate with and relate to others. In interacting with others, we are always making ourselves vulnerable to some extent; we are faced with the judgments of others and our own uncertainty surrounding their opinions of us, we risk embarrassing ourselves or offending others, and we must face and cope with the looming possibility of being rejected by the others that we try to connect with. Of course, there is also the type of risk that parents most often worry about: *bodily risk*. Bodily risk is the exposure of oneself to the possibility of bodily harm or injury, whether the injury be as minor as scraping one's knee, or as significant as breaking one's leg.

The level of risk involved in play also necessitates that there be some amount of *trust* between play participants. Just as we must trust our friends, coworkers, and intimate partners in

order to have a healthy, functioning relationship, so too must there be trust among playmates. A play relationship, no matter how singular and fleeting, is nevertheless a *real relationship* between individuals, with its own structure and boundaries that play participants must establish, communicate, acknowledge, adhere to, and perpetuate. Here again we are reminded that play is inherently intersubjective, and we are also shown more clearly why it is that play can have such a significant impact on the developing child: when children play together, they form a relationship that, like any interpersonal relationship, involves a great deal of risk and vulnerability. As we learned in Chapter One, our relationships with other people deeply influence and shape our developing sense of self. It is precisely because play is inherently intersubjective that it can have such a profound impact on the individual sense of self, development, and overall wellbeing.

As an example of failed play, we can once again turn to Winnicott's (1971) example of Patient X (pp. 35-50). We can recall that Patient X was the youngest of several children and, because of this, was born into a play environment that was already established; her siblings already had agreed-upon ways of playing that they found enjoyable, and Patient X did not experience their play-activities as making room for or being able to tolerate her own play-preferences and play-content. Because of this, Patient X adopted an attitude of passive compliance, playing along with her siblings (whom she spent a great deal of time with) in whatever capacity they desired of her.

We considered earlier that Patient X was experiencing the encroaching threat of the unpleasant phenomenon of having her transitional area (or play-space) filled with content that was created and determined by other people (instead of being filled with her own creative content). The games that Patient X played were not instances of free, genuine play (for her, anyway, though they might have been for her siblings), and, because of this and to the extent that these experiences were damaging, we could say that her childhood was filled with instances of *failed play*. We could also, however, consider what Patient X experienced in different terms: what Winnicott describes as the filling up of an individual's transitional area with another person's content could be interpreted as a form of what Laing calls *disconfirmation*.

We will recall that Laing says that one common form of disconfirmation involves the ignoring or rejecting of the other's perspective, and/or the overwriting of the other's perspective with one's own perspective. It could be argued that this is precisely what is happening in the cases that Winnicott describes, where one child dominates the play-area and forces their play-

content onto their playmate. In these cases, the individual's own boundaries, preferences, and desires are being ignored, dismissed or overlooked, and are substituted with someone else's perspective or preferences.

The concept of confirmation, as defined and explained by R.D. Laing, is, in fact, a critical component of play. Not only do we require the *permission* and *consent* of our playmates (in numerous ways), but we also require their *confirmation*. First and foremost, we require their acknowledgment and confirmation of our agency and subjectivity, and of the validity of our perspective. Additionally, we require confirmation of: the play content that we introduce in the shared play-space, the particular role that we are playing, our ability to play in general and to play well, our ability to take on different roles and positions in the play-space, our ability to get along with our playmates and contribute positively to the play-experience, and so on. For us to be able to play well with others and share meaningful play experiences, it is necessary that our playmates acknowledge, understand, and respect who we are, what abilities we possess, and our ability to be a contributing member of the play-experience. Because the play-space is a shared space of being-for-two in which our perspectives overlap and come together, it is necessary that all play participants recognize each other's agency and the validity of their perspectives. If these things do not happen, then play cannot begin or the activity that is undertaken will not truly be *play*. If children are not confirmed in these ways, then play can become a negative or traumatic experience, or it can *fail* altogether.

Again, much of the disconfirmation that occurs during play will be relatively mild and is not likely to have a lasting negative impact. However, certain instances of play can have a long-lasting impact and influence the child's self-development. As an example of this, we will consider the example of a young schoolgirl, Macey, playing with her peers during recess. Macey attends an English-speaking, North American elementary school. She is a recent immigrant whose first language is Russian, but who is now fluent in English (though she speaks with a slight accent). She is a timid, bright, and friendly girl, but the fact that she is new to the school and that she is an immigrant has led to her being known as "the foreign girl" and has made the other children reluctant to engage with her. This has prevented her from making friends as easily as she had hoped. Though shy, Macey eventually begins to reach out to other girls in her class and eventually finds a pre-established close-knit group of girls who agree to spend time with her and to play with her during recess. Their favourite game to play is a superhero game where

several masked heroes battle against an evil witch. The first time that Macey plays with these girls they tell her that she must play the witch because she is new to the group. Macey agrees and is happy to be able to play with the girls. However, as the days and the weeks go by the girls keep insisting that Macey play the role of the evil witch, even though Macey has expressed interest in playing a hero for a change. The girls never allow Macey to play as a superhero and, though they call her a friend, there is an implicit understanding that these girls will no longer be interested in Macey if she stops playing the role of the villain. Thus, Macey is faced with the decision of either continuing to give into these girls and play according to their rules (in exchange for having some classmates to interact with and the illusion of popularity), or standing up for herself and going back to having fewer peers. In her mind, she didn't have much of a choice. Thus, for quite some time, Macey continued to play the witch, thus playing in a way that was contrary to her own interests and desires. This meant that Macey's experience of these play interactions was uncomfortable, unsatisfying, and more of an obligation than a free choice; Macey was being coerced into playing games that were already structured and determined, and that made no room for her and her agency.

More than twenty years pass and Macey is an adult with a successful career, a long-term partner, and a child of her own. Nevertheless, her memory of her experience with these girls has stuck with her. This particular experience is one that stands out to her as a markedly negative experience and one that has likely had a meaningful impact on her self-development. Macey explains how being repeatedly cast as the villain by these girls made her question whether she might actually be villainous or witch-like—*it challenged her sense of self*.

What this case study is describing is an instance of *disconfirmation*. Up until encountering these “playmates,” Macey had a view of herself as a certain kind of person—as a friendly, kind, likeable person who did her best to be social instead of being shy. Macey saw within herself the potential to be a superhero—to be hero-like, to embody, even if only for a short time and in a specific realm of experiencing, the traits of heroism, courage, justice, goodness, and likeability. This sense of self and her potential was, however, *disconfirmed* by her potential playmates; they did not see her as these things, and they did not demonstrate any respect or consideration for her view of herself as someone who could possibly embody these characteristics. They were not even willing to give her a chance to “prove herself.” In fact, it could be said that Macey's playmates were even disconfirming her agency and subjectivity. To

her playmates, Macey was not a free and equal, creative agent with a perspective on the world that holds as much validity as anyone else's. Rather, it could be said that Macey was, to these particular children, a mere *prop* or *tool*. These children needed someone—anyone who would concede—to play a certain part in their game in order for the game to be “complete,” for it to have the form and structure that they desired, and to make their desired roles make sense. After all, what is a hero without a villain to bring to justice? The results of these disconfirmatory acts towards Macey were (a) that the game was never able to become a successful instance of first-order play (i.e. the play “failed” on Macey's end), and (b) Macey's sense of self was challenged and called into question, and left her with an enduring sense of insecurity and self-doubt that persisted into adulthood. As a result of these disconfirming, uncomfortable play experiences (in which other children revealed to Macey a potential interpretation of who she was that was at odds with her own self-perspective, and in which her own agency and freedom were denied and called into question), Macey was left with a lingering sense of uncertainty surrounding the validity of her own perspective and her agency; she was left wondering if the person she takes herself to be is “wrong,” and, as an adult, still struggles to cope with the tension between doing what she wants to do and what she perceives others as expecting or demanding of her.

If we consider Macey's unfortunate play experience in Winnicott's terms, then we could say that Macey's playmates forced their own play-content onto Macey, thus denying her the chance to introduce and satisfy her own play-content. In other words, Macey was denied the opportunity to create and explore her own play-content and to satisfy her own needs in her play. Because of this, Macey found herself acting out the play-content that satisfied her playmate's needs, sacrificing her own desires and preferences in order to do so. This seems to be similar to what Winnicott's Patient X experienced in play with her siblings. Patient X and Macey both grew up questioning the validity and real-ness of their identities and sense of who they were as they result of their upsetting play experiences and the lack of opportunity to engage in their own play. However, in Patient X's case, it seems as though her siblings pushed their play-preferences onto Patient X unknowingly and without the use of force; Patient X's siblings likely didn't even realize that their sister was not enjoying their play activities and that she wasn't fully present. The children in Macey's case, on the other hand, seemed to be more conscious of the fact that they were forcing their play-preferences onto Macey, and continued to do so even after she expressed discomfort with the situation.

These examples serve to illustrate the lasting impact that experiences of failed play can have on early development and the child's sense of self. What may seem like a minor disagreement or necessary compromise in a trivial play activity is thus revealed to be something much more significant and serious (from the point of view of the children who are caught up in the play-situation). Because childhood play experiences are such an important aspect of self-development and because they are so important to the child, it is absolutely critical that: (a) we acknowledge that childhood play is a genuine *need* and an irreplaceable part of the child's healthy self-development; (b) we continue to strive to understand the phenomenon of play from the child's perspective in order that we may appreciate more fully and accurately what meaning play has for the child; (c) we provide children with ample opportunity to engage in free, creative, self-directed play; and that (d) we do our best to understand and mitigate the damage that can be done through the child's experience of negative or traumatic play. Understanding the phenomenon of play means recognizing how powerful and potent of an experience it can be, and how far-reaching and penetrative its influence on the child is.

2.4 Conclusion

This chapter has argued for the following three claims: (1) that play is fundamentally and essentially a matter of self-development; (2) that play is inherently and necessarily intersubjective; and, following from these two claims, (3) that how we play really matters and can have a lasting impact on the individual's development or sense of self.

Winnicott's view of play reveals that it is a complex, intersubjective phenomenon that affords the child with an opportunity to discover more fully the nature of reality. Starting from the earliest stages of infancy, the child's capacity for play is dependent on his relations with others, and those early childhood interactions ultimately shape and influence the child's developing sense of self. Play offers the child a rich opportunity for self-discovery and self-growth in which: the child can experience the blend of the internal and external and subjective and objective, thus allowing for unification of the personality; the child can live and act freely, allowing the child to practice at being creative and bringing into being new meanings and possibilities; the child can have an experience of formless existence that allows him to exist in

the moment in an authentic way and that maximizes opportunities for self-discovery; the child can socialize and form meaningful bonds with others, ultimately allowing the child to develop a better understanding of the subjectivity and agency of others; the child can express his aggression and other negative feelings in a safe space, thus helping the child make sense of, accept, and express safely his difficult emotions; and, finally, the child can play in ways that help him make sense of and overcome individual fears, worries, and anxieties, ultimately allowing for the mastery of anxiety. These are just several examples of how play contributes to healthy self-development.

An examination of how the child develops the capacity for play reveals that even the child's mere ability to play is dependent on his interactions with others. According to Winnicott, the capacity for play develops out of the infant's gradual separation from the mother during the weaning process. As the child begins to realize that he is distinct from the rest of the world and that he has limited control over it, the transitional area begins to open up between the infant and the mother. This transitional area is the space where play occurs. It has also been shown that the child's play preferences and habits are always shaped by others, and that the child's opportunities for play are always dependent on others. These are the first ways in which play can be said to be intersubjective. However, it has also been argued that play is intersubjective in the sense that it is a form of communication that children use to express themselves. It has been considered that the overlap of play-spaces between individuals during play is akin to Merleau-Ponty's idea of the being-shared-by-two that occurs in the overlap of distinct perspectives on the world when individuals engage in authentic, reciprocal speech. It has thus been suggested that genuine play acts can be considered to be akin to Merleau-Ponty's idea of first-order speech. Communication is intersubjective by nature—it develops out of the need for individuals to communicate with one another and access the perspectives that others have on the world, and bridges the gap between self and other. Play is a phenomenon that helps children make sense of the existence of other people, and enables them to come to understand the subjectivity and agency of others. By connecting with others in play, children are able to learn more about the existence of individual perspectives on the world, and they also learn how to make sense of and handle perspectives that differ from their own. Play lets children form meaningful bonds with other individuals that hold the potential to allow for mutual growth and self-enrichment.

Finally, it has been argued that, because play is an intersubjective phenomenon that serves as a critical component of self-development, how the child plays really matters and can have a lasting impact on the child's development or sense of self. What occurs in the play-space doesn't just matter in the moment or for the duration of the play-activity, and incidents that occur during play should not be written off as unimportant because they occur outside the boundaries of the objective world. Failed instances of play can have a profound impact on the child and be experienced by the child as deeply meaningful, serious, and distressing. In particular, disconfirmation in play can have serious negative consequences (just as it can in the rest of one's life). Winnicott and Laing both acknowledge the ways in which others can reject our perspective, ignore it, or attempt to over-write it (with their own perspective). When other people attempt to stifle or erase our perspective during play, they deny us the opportunity to experiment with our freedom, agency, and creativity, to engage in creative object-use, to experience authentic formlessness and relaxation, and to be the person who we want to be. Two primary examples were given to help illustrate the long-lasting negative impacts of such disconfirmatory gesture in play: the example of Winnicott's Patient X, and the example of a young schoolgirl named Macey.

CONCLUSION

Chapter One of this project began by examining the nature of all human experience. It was argued that all experience—experience of the self, world, and others—is intersubjective in nature. First, it was noted that we are born into the world as embodied beings and that our bodies are themselves inherently intersubjective machines; the perception of others is a built-in, unavoidable aspect of our experience and we immediately recognize other people *as other people*. We are, from birth, in possession of a bodily intentionality that allows us to communicate and make contact with others, and our bodies naturally and effortlessly recognize and grasp the bodily intentionality of others. The experience of other people is thus built into our experience of the body, self, and world. Starting from our bodies, then, we can see how we are thoroughly and necessarily intersubjective entities who cannot help but experience the world as intersubjective.

That our experience is thoroughly and essentially intersubjective was demonstrated through an examination of our experience of our world starting from infancy. It was explained that the individual is born into a world that seems largely determined and in which the individual has an experience of the self as co-existing with others in harmony; the individual initially lacks an understanding of the nature of subjectivity and, thus, does not perceive the numerous and varied perspectives on the world that others have (i.e. the individual does not initially recognize other perspectives as existing). The individual then experiences a gradual realization of the self as existing as an independent agency and comes to acknowledge other people *as other* (i.e. the individual begins to recognize the ‘otherness’ of the external world and other people). The individual’s recognition of the subjectivity and agency of others is simultaneously a recognition of the individual’s own subjectivity and agency. In other words, recognition of the other is, to some extent, recognition of the self; we come to realize our being-for-self at the same time as we come to realize our being-for-others. Eventually, we begin to recognize the power of the gaze of the other and the ways in which the other determines the world—a world that we previously experienced as determined by us. This recognition of the possibility-making and meaning-giving powers of others reveals to us that other people do, in fact, have differing perspectives on the world that may be in tension with or challenge our own perspectives. Sartre’s example of the gaze of the other was given to illustrate what the experience of this recognition of the other as a full subjectivity is like, and reveals to us the individual’s need to access the other’s perspective. It was then noted that, when we experience the other’s gaze as falling *on us*, we experience

something of ourselves being taken from us; we realize that the other has a perspective on who we are and that their perspective is legitimate, and we desire to know how in-line with our own view the other's perspective is. It is always possible that the other person has a radically different view on who we are or that they see something in us that we cannot. There thus exists a lived tension between our being-for-self and being-for-others that calls for resolution. Thus, in order to find out who we are (for the other), we must make contact with the other in order that the other might reveal to us who we are for them.

Making contact with the other and accessing their unique perspective on the world ultimately means *communicating with* the other, and the primary means that we have of communicating with the other is through the use of *language*. It has been argued that language is itself a tool born out of our intersubjectivity and the resulting need to interact with one another, and that language is itself an intersubjective phenomenon. Merleau-Ponty's understanding of language and speech has been used to demonstrate how engaging in honest, open dialogue with the other allows for the merging of individual perspectives. Merleau-Ponty refers to the overlap of individual perspectives that occurs in reciprocal communication as "being-shared-by-two." Additionally, it has been noted that Merleau-Ponty identifies two, distinct but related ways of using language: first-order speech and second-order speech. Second-order speech is comprised of the use of commonly-understood, mundane, day-to-day language, such as when we order a cup of coffee or talk about the weather. First-order speech, on the other hand, is authentic, creative, revelatory speech. In first-order speech the meaning of commonly-understood terms is altered or altogether new meaning is brought into being. In the being-shared-by-two achieved in first-order speech, the individual is afforded an opportunity to overcome the limitations of their own perspective and to have their view of themselves, the world, or others enriched by the other's perspective. By making contact with others and engaging in honest, authentic dialogue, we are capable of learning new things about ourselves or coming to understand ourselves differently. In doing this, we can transcend our own, limited perspective in ways that we could not without the help of others. Thus, others are already seen to be a useful and necessary contributor to the individual's sense of self and perception of the world.

The second half of Chapter One has offered an analysis of the role of others in individual self-development from infancy through adolescence, with a focus on the role of the family in early childhood development. It was noted that the child's first sense of identity and

understanding of the world is largely dependent on their family situation; how the child understands himself and the world is at first determined by his family members and close others, and by the rules and mores of his society. Each family has their own beliefs, values, and ways of relating to the world, and the child's first exposure to the external, shared world is through his family. The child's initial understanding of the world is, thus, initially shaped by his family's beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours.

Winnicott's account of infantile self-development was then considered. It was argued that the infant first experiences himself as indistinct from the mother. The infant's experience of self-sameness is largely dependent on his mother's ability to adapt extremely well to the infant's needs, granting him an illusory sense of omnipotent control over the external world. However, the mother must gradually stop adapting to the infant's needs so closely, and the infant must eventually begin to experience a steady increase in environmental failure. This experience of increasing environmental failure (which occurs in keeping with the infant's growing ability to handle that failure) ultimately leads to disillusionment, which causes the infant to gain a more accurate understanding of the external world as objective and shared, and the end-result of the process of disillusionment is the infant coming to recognize himself as distinct from his mother (and from the rest of the objective world). Winnicott says that a mother who is "good-enough" will be capable of giving her child this initial experience of omnipotence, but that she will also be capable of completing the weaning process that leads to disillusionment. As the child continues to develop, he continues to experience a gradual increase in his sense of himself as separate and distinct from others, and gains a gradual understanding of what it means to be a subject.

Beauvoir explains that the child is born into a world that seems to be already-determined and filled with meaning that the child did not contribute to making. The child's first experience of the world is as a place that is created and maintained by adults, and to which he does not contribute meaningfully. The child thus initially experiences himself as somewhat helpless and insignificant in the face of others and their interpretations of him, viewing adults as god-like creatures who are infallible or whose authority is absolute. The child's first sense of self is, as a result of this, largely made up of others' perspectives on who he is. While the child's identity is never fully determined by others, the child plays a much more passive role in his self-creation at this stage in his development.

However, as the child continues to mature and nears puberty, the child begins to question the world as it has been presented to him; the child begins to question and challenge the meanings that he has been taught, gradually coming to realize that adults are not the divinities that they once appeared to be. Ultimately, the child realizes that the world is comprised of countless individual perspectives and that no single perspective is absolute. The child thus comes to the gradual realization of his own subjectivity and agency, discovering that he has the same powers as others, that he is free to choose to live as he pleases, and that his decisions do, in fact, have a meaningful impact on the world and real consequences. As Beauvoir explains it, adolescence is thus the project of coming to terms with the overwhelming nature of one's freedom and agency, and taking up a more active role in determining the self.

Chapter Two of this project then provided a definition of what play is according to Winnicott, arguing that, contrary to the age-old, common-sense view of play as unnecessary and fundamentally a matter of leisure, play is essentially grounded in reality and is a critical part of early self-development. Some specific examples of how, exactly, play contributes to the child's healthy self-development were considered. It was argued that play contributes to self-development by: promoting unification of the self; offering the child a space in which he can practice at being free and creative; affording the child a space in which he can exist honestly, authentically, and formlessly; providing the child with opportunities for socialization and to learn about the subjectivity and agency of others; giving the child a safe, tolerant space in which to express and manage aggressive feelings and urges; and, finally, by providing the child with opportunities to recognize, work through, and master individual fears and anxieties. Play teaches the child that the world is filled with possibilities, and lets the child figure out how to make sense of, integrate, and make use of those possibilities; play provides the child with an opportunity to practice at creating new possibilities and enacting those possibilities. Play is ultimately the child's first and primary means of practicing at coping with and managing reality and the self. Through play the child can learn new things about himself, others, and the world in safe, enriching ways that promote the development of a healthy sense of self.

The second portion of Chapter Two argued that play, like the rest of human experience, is inherently intersubjective. It was argued that what we have learned about play in this paper reveals to us that play is necessarily intersubjective. How the individual capacity for play develops, the extent to which individual play preferences and experiences are dependent on and

related to others, the large role that play has in early self-development, and that play is a means of communicating and forming relationships with others all support this claim. Much like language, play exists as a phenomenon that is necessarily interpersonal and that serves to bridge the gap between self and other. Through play, we can reveal ourselves to others, connect with others, and learn and grow together in unique ways that are not found in most of our regular experience.

Finally, Chapter Two argued that, because it is such a critical aspect of early self-development and because it can have such a significant impact on the child's developing identity, the child's play experiences are very important and should not be taken lightly. Because an individual's enduring sense of self and experience of reality are shaped through play, how we play really matters. It is not just in the moment that we are playing that play is meaningful and important; our play-experiences can have a lasting impact on us, whether for better or worse. Because of this, we ought to be mindful and careful when we play, and respect the play of others. When play goes awry or "fails" it can be really damaging. It was argued that we should be especially mindful of the role of confirmation and disconfirmation in play. Laing's notion of confirmation was again taken up here to demonstrate parallels between Winnicott's ideas surrounding traumatic play-experiences and Laing's notion of disconfirmation. It was concluded that severe disconfirmation in play can have serious, negative consequences, and can negatively impact the child's growing sense of self.

In conclusion, then, this project has argued for five main theses: (1) that the self and all human experience are inherently intersubjective; (2) that self-development is necessarily an intersubjective, shared project; (3) that play is an essential and critical component of early self-development; (4) that play is itself inherently and necessarily intersubjective; and, finally, (5) that how we play really matters and can have an enduring impact on the child's sense of self. Contrary to the misleading and dangerous view of play as an optional luxury that is essentially disconnected from the demands of reality, this project contends that play must be understood as being, essentially and at its core, a matter of the child engaging with reality and working at the project of self-development. Play has traditionally been seen as the opposite of "work," where work is viewed as being the answering to the demands of reality and the sacrificing of other desires and pleasures for what ought to be done—for what reality demands. Work is thus seen as necessary and play is regarded as something optional. However, what this project has argued for

is the claim that, in fact and in a sense, play is itself a form of *work*; it is a working on the self and working at learning to handle reality, to come to terms with reality, to come to see reality for what it is. Play is the child's way of practicing at being a person; it is the work of creating the self and developing a richer understanding of self, world, and others. As Piaget says, "Play is the work of childhood" (Krull, 2010).

APPENDIX

The Role of the Family in Self-Development According to Salvador Minuchin

“In all cultures, the family imprints its members with selfhood.”

-Salvador Minuchin

In our investigation of human identity and self-creation, the first social system that we must turn to in order to understand the role of others in personal self-development is the *family*. In establishing what role the family plays in individual self-development, it is important that we first understand exactly what a “family” is and what its function is. All of us are born into some kind of family—a system of relatively close-knit individuals, regardless of what specific form the family system takes.¹⁸ The family structure is a whole that is not reducible to any of its individual, constituent parts, as the family structure is largely comprised of the unique arrangements that govern transactions within the family unit and between individual members and the outside world.

In *Families and Family Therapy* (1974), family therapist and theorist Salvador Minuchin reminds us that humans are inherently dependent on each other and have traditionally survived in groups—human history reveals to us the extent of our interdependence and our inherently intersubjective nature. When we are born, we are born into the care of particular others who constitute our family. These people are the ones who are responsible for caring for us—for taking care of our most basic physiological needs and our more complex psychological and emotional needs. What it means to be raised by other people is that we are subjected to their views on the world, people, and on who we are. The family that we are born into provides us with a *pre-given definition of the world*. Our parents or caregivers, as adults, already have relatively developed religious, cultural, social, political, and moral views that inform their way of life and the ways in which they choose to structure their family system. Furthermore, our parents

¹⁸ For the purposes of this paper, the differences between familial structures (e.g. structures including same-sex parents or more than two parental figures, single-parent families, adoptive families and foster families) is not considered significant. While some “non-nuclear” family systems do present the child and other family members with unique stressors and development challenges, such differences are too vast to warrant consideration here.

and other family members often already have ideas regarding *who we are* or *who we are to become*, how we will live our lives, and how we will interact with them. We are taught by our family what is right and wrong, good and bad, what it means to live a good life, what kind of person we should ideally be, what meaning there is to life, etc. We inherit their thoughts, beliefs, and prejudices, and even their fears and desires. Thus, it can be said that the one of the primary and most important functions of the family is *to give children a sense of self—an identity* (Minuchin, 1974, Ch. 3).

Minuchin notes that the human self is typically experienced as having *two distinct aspects* that initially come about largely as a result of our belonging to a family system: “a sense of belonging and a sense of being separate” (p. 47.) Minuchin goes on to say that, “The laboratory in which these ingredients are mixed and dispensed is the family, the matrix of identity” (p. 47).

Minuchin ultimately argues that the experience of the self (and, indeed, one’s world) as being twofold runs much deeper than a sense of being both distinct and interrelated. This is to say that our experience of the self is *dual* in multiple ways. First, our experience of the self is dual in the sense that we have an experience of both an *inner* reality (an “*inside*”) comprised of thoughts, feelings, beliefs, desires, and fantasies, and an *external* reality (an “*outside*”) comprised of perceptions, actions, and behaviours that we share with other people. The second sense in which the self is dual is that every individual experiences both an ‘internal,’ *subjective sense of self* as well as a (often varying) sense of self that is reflected back to them from without, primarily through their interactions with other people—an *objective sense of self*. This contrast is essentially what we have identified in distinguishing between our *being-for-self* and *being-for-others*—the self is comprised of both who we personally take ourselves to be, as well as the various portraits of who we are that other people develop and reflect back to us.

The third way, however, in which our identity is dual is that we experience our identity as being comprised of both a sense of *being a distinct individual* with clear boundaries that separate us from the rest of the world and other people, while at the same time experiencing ourselves as intimately connected with and *belonging to other people* and a shared world; we experience ourselves both as a singular unit, and as a member of a group who participates in a shared identity. This sense of being both intimately related to and differing from others is what we were discussing in our exploration of Merleau-Ponty’s thoughts on intersubjectivity, the experience of

other people, and communication, and in Laing's ideas of confirmation and ontological security. Minuchin says that:

In the early process of socialization, families mold and program the child's behavior and sense of identity. The sense of belonging comes with an accommodation on the child's part to the family groups and with his assumption of transactional patterns in the family structure that are consistent throughout different life events... every member's sense of identity is influenced by his sense of belonging to a specific family. (p. 47)

Where this feeling of being simultaneously separate and belonging to others first develops is within the context of the family unit. This is because the family is the first source of identity that we experience. However, this passage from Minuchin also reveals a fourth sense in which we experience the self as being binary: we experience the self as having elements of *freedom* and *creativity*, which are contrasted with *conformity*. As the above passage explains, that we conform ourselves and our actions to certain external standards and norms is something that begins in order to belong to, and as a result of belonging to, a family system that has a particular structure and unique transactional patterns that we must accommodate. Beginning early in life, we find ourselves in possession of certain powers and capabilities, and, at the same time as we discover these, we realize that we must restrain ourselves and conform to certain standards and norms for a variety of reasons (e.g. to 'fit in,' to please others, to learn how to do certain things, to gain a better understanding of the world, to develop new powers and capabilities, and to develop 'discipline' and self-control).

Finally, this dual structure of conformity and creativity reveals a fifth way in which the human self is dual: it contains both elements of *passivity* and *activity*. When we take up our freedom and act creatively, we are making use of the *active* aspect of our freedom, while we are making use of the *passive* aspect of our freedom in the instances when we withhold or forego our freedom and creativity and, instead, adopt an attitude of *conformity*. This is not, however, to say that passivity and activity are mutually exclusive.

Minuchin acknowledges that, while we may think of these aspects of the self as being distinct, a closer examination of our experience reveals to us that these seemingly-opposed aspects of the self are intimately interrelated and inseparable. In keeping with what we learned from Merleau-Ponty and Laing, Minuchin recognizes the ways in which our being-for-self and

being-for-others are inseparable. Our own sense of who we are is always informed by our perception of who we are for others and by our relationships with others; our personal, 'inner' reality is shaped by experiences of 'external,' shared reality; our experience of freedom is always influenced and limited by our past and present situations; and our passivity and activity are similarly interrelated.

Minuchin notes that the dual nature of our identity (in the sense of belonging and being distinct) is represented in many countries through the usage of a *given name + surname* identification system. Our given name is what identifies us as an individual that is distinct and unique from the rest of the family, while our surname is what identifies us as being one member of a larger group, of a family (Ch. 3). Thus, our names serve as constant reminders of the ways in which who we are is shaped by others, our relationships with our families, and what it means to be a member of that particular family—we carry with us the burden of a history that does not belong solely to us and that serves as a reminder of our origins. Our surnames carry with them the sense of *obligation* and *responsibility*, as well as *ownership* or *belonging* in the possessive sense—we *belong* to a particular family, to particular parents or caregivers and to certain other ancestors. Thus, our experience of belonging to a family sets us up to experience the self as something that is, at least in part, *communal*. We experience ourselves as intertwined with the existences, values, beliefs, and behaviours of larger groups.

The family is a sub-system of broader human society and, as a result, family systems will necessarily mimic the current state of and changes in larger social structures (Ch. 3). The two primary social functions of the family are, according to Minuchin, to: (1) protect individual members (the internal aspect of the family) and (2) to serve as a locus of cultural accommodation and transition (the external, cultural aspect of the family). In other words, one of the primary responsibilities of the family unit is to govern individual members' responses to both internal and external stimuli (i.e. their beliefs, values, and emotions on the one hand, and their behaviours, actions, and external relationships on the other). The goal of protecting individual members is a goal that is internal to the family structure, serving to protect the internal states of its individual members and relationships between them. By acting as a locus of cultural accommodation, on the other hand, the family is supposed to ensure that it reinforces and transmits accepted societal norms and traditions through its individual members; the family is thereby oriented externally, promoting the beliefs, norms, ideologies, prejudices, and cultural artifacts of a particular society

(Ch. 3). Through all ages, one of the primary and most important functions of the family system has been to produce stable, capable progeny that are able to function in society and meet its demands, and to contribute to the current social structure in an acceptable capacity. The pressure on the family has traditionally been, in other words, to produce “normal,” socially-acceptable and functioning individuals.

Within the family system, the behaviours of individual members are regulated by *transactional patterns*, the specific combination of which is unique to each family. These patterns are, according to Minuchin, maintained through two sources of constraint placed on the family and its members: (a) the generic, universal rules of family regulation that are common to a particular society, including societally reinforced power hierarchies, sub-systems, and husband-wife codependency, and (b) the idiosyncratic, family-specific patterns and expectations that are derived from personal interactions within the family, over time and often built up from small(er) interactions. Thus, while the main functions of all families are roughly the same (i.e. to protect their members, to reinforce and pass down societal norms, and to ensure survival of the family tree), each family has a unique way of going about this, and these universal functions are accompanied by underlying secondary functions and pressures that are specific to each family. Thus, we see not only *variation* in the religious and cultural practices of families, but also a vast variety of idiosyncrasies, rules, beliefs, ways of expressing emotions and handling situations, and ways of interacting with particular other family members, etc.

Another observation about the family system that Minuchin takes note of is the apparent contradiction and tension that is inherent to parenting: children must be nurtured, protected, and guided, ensuring that they are safe, healthy, and prepared to enter society in an acceptable role, but ensuring that this is so (and thereby fulfilling the two primary functions of the family mentioned earlier) means that parents must also be controlling and restricting (Ch. 3). If a parent is too nurturing and protective, then their child may be safe and happy (at least for a while), but they are not likely to be well-prepared for entering society. On the other hand, if a parent is too controlling and restrictive, their child may not grow up feeling safe or happy, and may not develop well as an individual, or may even develop emotional or psychological complications that prevent them from functioning well in broader society.

Thus, while this tension is likely to always be experienced in the process of parenting, it is critical that parents find a balance between the two extremes (of being entirely permissive and

being overly-domineering)—a balance that will vary in specific proportion depending on the individual child and their environment, and varying at different times in the child’s life. What constitutes a good approach to parenting (in the most general sense) depends largely on the child’s age. For example, Minuchin notes that very young children require that their parents provide them with a great deal of nurturing and less stringent control, while control and frequent guidance become increasingly important as the child gets older. However, by the time the child reaches puberty or adolescence, the child’s demand for increasing autonomy conflicts with the parents’ previously-increased levels of control (Ch. 3). The child who has reached adolescence requires the freedom and opportunities to be able to make his own decisions and explore the world of possibilities that he is faced with. Because of this, the adolescent’s parents must yet again adapt their parenting techniques; they must find a new mixture of the elements of control and nurturing in order to allow their child to experience a new level of freedom while ensuring that their child continues to enjoy a sense of safety and security, and while maintaining the boundary between parent and child.

Thus, the only way that parents can properly protect and guide their children is by being, to some extent and at the right time, both nurturing *and* controlling and restricting. This is to say that, while parents may initially experience a permissive and nurturing attitude as being at odds with a stricter and more controlling attitude, the two are, in fact, inseparable; good parenting necessarily involves a mixture of these attitudes (combined with good judgment). There are, in fact, ways of being restrictive that can offer a child guidance while still allowing the child to feel cared about and nurtured, and ways of nurturing a child that offer them direction and guidance. This is to say that control and nurturing occur along a spectrum, with only the most extreme ends (i.e. of being entirely permissive or entirely domineering) being incompatible. Good parenting occurs in the middle-ground of this spectrum, where control and nurturing overlap and where they are used in a degree that is appropriate to the child’s developmental progress.

Finally, in answer to the question of what a “normal” (i.e. well-functioning, healthy) family looks like, Minuchin says that theorists (and therapists) must have “a schema based on viewing the family as a system, operating within specific social contexts” (p. 51). This is to say that there is no single, particular family model or system that will be successful in all circumstances. Rather, what determines whether a family is “normal” or successful or not is a

family's ability to meet certain *situational* criteria.¹⁹ This schema, he says, contains three main criteria that must be met by a family before it can be considered “normal” or healthy: (1) the structure of the family must be “that of an open sociocultural system in transformation” (i.e., the family must recognize itself as fluid and answerable to demands made from both within and outside of it); (2) the family must be able to withstand and transition through various stages of development that will require a re-structuring of the family system (e.g. the ageing and maturing of children); and (3) the family is able to adapt to changed circumstances “so as to maintain continuity and enhance the psychosocial growth of each member” (i.e. the structure of the family must be such that it can tolerate major changes to the family structure, such as the ageing of children, divorce or separation, and the serious illness or death of a family member) (p. 51). In other words, as was mentioned before, the family structure is comprised of various functional demands that organize the interactions of its various family members. The mark of a healthy family system is its ability to maintain itself, offering *resistance* to dramatic change while still being *flexible* enough to tolerate and adapt to changes in circumstances.

Furthermore, the family must have clearly delineated *boundaries* between well-functioning, healthy subsystems. A family system is typically made up of multiple components that, together, constitute the “family” itself. The traditional example of this is the idea of the “nuclear family” that is comprised of (1) mother-father and (2) children.²⁰ In this traditional example, clear boundaries must exist between the mother-father subsystem and the subsystem containing their children. These boundaries help ensure that each member of the family has a relatively clear “place” and “function” within the broader family system, and prevent the family structure from collapsing. However, these boundaries between subsystems must be neither too flexible nor too rigid. Excessive rigidity or flexibility in boundary functioning are signs of an abnormal, ill-functioning, or unhealthy family system. *Disengaged* families and subsystems have boundaries that are far too rigid, making them unable to tolerate sudden or significant changes in members or in the environment, while *enmeshed* families and subsystems have boundaries that

¹⁹ Again, this is why this paper is not concerned with comparing the efficacy of particular family models or structures; any unique family unit can be successful in helping to produce healthy, well-adjusted children provided that they meet certain functional and situational criteria.

²⁰ However, there are numerous alternatives to this. For example, one family may be comprised of: (1) single-parent, (2) older children, (3) youngest child. Another may be made up of: (1) grandmother, (2) mother-mother, (3) child. Yet another could be made up of: (1) grandmother-grandfather, (2) mother-step-father, (3) aunt, and (4) children.

are far too diffuse, potentially allowing for adaptability, but lacking in a clearly-delineated and mutually-accepted structure with reasonable boundaries (Minuchin, 1974, Ch. 3). These patterns of boundaries can be signs of pathology, and “normal,” healthy families exist along a continuum that runs between these two extremes.

In summation, we have seen that the family unit is, by its very nature, intended to serve as the first source of identity for the child and as a hub for socialization. The family unit is intended to pass onto the child a certain set of societally-accepted rules, norms, and guidelines for behaviours, and to indoctrinate them into a particular culture or religion, thus preparing them for their eventual entry into society. The family is the first experience we have of being told how the world is, what good and bad are, who we are, and what kind of person we should strive to become. Whether we are raised in a “normal,” healthy, functioning family will have an impact on our development, our sense of self, and our ability to navigate the broader world and form meaningful relationships with other people.

REFERENCES

- American Journal of Play (2013). Reflections on pretend play, imagination, and child development: An interview with Dorothy G. and Jerome L. Singer. *American Journal of Play*, 6(1), 1-14.
- Beauvoir, S. (1976). *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. (B. Frechtman, Trans.). New York, NY: Kensington Publishing Corp.
- Field, T., De Stefano, L., & Koewler III, J. H. (1982). Fantasy play of toddlers and preschoolers. *Developmental Psychology*, 18(4), 503-508.
- Freud, S. (2000). *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*. (J. Strachey, Trans.). USA: Basic Books.
- Glenn, N. M., Knight, C. J., Holt, N. L., & Spence, J. C. (2012). Meanings of play among children. *Childhood*, 20(2), 185-199.
- Krull, E. (2010). Piaget—Play is the work of childhood. *Psych Central*. Retrieved on December 26, 2016, from: <https://blogs.psychcentral.com/family/2010/09/piaget-play-is-the-work-of-childhood/>
- Laing, R.D. (1960). *The Divided Self*. Middlesex, England: Penguin Books.
- Laing, R. D. (1961). *Self and Others*. London, England: Penguin Group.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (2012). *Phenomenology of Perception*. (D. A. Landes, Trans.). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Milteer, R. M., Ginsburg, K. R., Council on Communications and Media, & Committee on Psychological Aspects of Child and Family Health (2012). The importance of play in promoting healthy childhood development and maintaining strong parent-child bonds: Focus on children poverty. *Pediatrics*, 129(1), e204-e213. Downloaded from pediatrics.aappublications.org on March 20, 2015.
- Minuchin, S. (1974). *Families and Family Therapy*. USA: President and Fellows of Harvard College.
- Russon, J. (2003). *Human Experience: Philosophy, Neurosis, and the Elements of Everyday Life*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Sartre, J. (1984). *Being and Nothingness*. (H. E. Barnes, Trans.). New York, NY: Washington Square Press.
- Wenner, M. (2009). The serious need for play. *Scientific American Mind*.

<https://www.uwsp.edu/education/Documents/gesell/needForPlay.pdf> [No page numbers on PDF accessed. Pages have been numbered 1-5, from the first page to the last].

Winnicott, D. W. (1971). *Playing and Reality*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Winnicott, D. W. (1964). *The Child, the Family, and the Outside World*. Reading, MS: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, Inc.

UNICEF (2017). "The Convention of the Rights of the Child." Downloaded from: www.unicef-irc.org (direct-link: <https://www.unicef-irc.org/portfolios/crc.html>).