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The Role of Play in Development

♦ To define play as an activity that gives pleasure to the child is inaccurate for two reasons.

First, many activities gives the child much keener experiences of pleasure than play, for example, sucking a pacifier, even though the child is not being satiated. And **Second**, there are games in which the activity itself is not pleasurable, for example, games, predominantly at the end of preschool and the beginning of school age, that give pleasure only if the child finds the result interesting. Sporting games (not only athletic sports, but other games that can be won or lost) are very often accompanied by displeasure when the outcome is unfavorable to the child.

♦ But while pleasure cannot be regarded as the defining characteristic of play, it seems to me that theories which ignore the fact that play fulfills children's needs result in a pedantic intellectualization of play.

In speaking in more general terms, many theorists mistakenly disregard the child's needs—understood in the broadest sense to include everything that is a motive for action. We often describe a child's development as the development of his intellectual functions; every child stands before us as a theoretician who, characterized by a higher o lower level of intellectual development, moves from one stage to another.

• But if we ignore the child's needs, and the incentives which are effective in getting him to act, we will never be able to understand his advance from one developmental stage to the next, because every advance is connected with a marked change in motives, inclinations, and incentives.

That which is of the greatest interest to the infant has almost ceased to interest the toddler. The maturing of needs is a dominant issue in this discussion because it is impossible to ignore the fact that the child satisfies certain needs in play. *If we do not understand the special character of these needs, we cannot understand the uniqueness of play as a form of activity.*

♦ A very young child tends to gratify her desires immediately; normally the interval between a desire and its fulfillment is extremely short. No one has met a child under three years old who wants to do something a few days in the future. However, at the preschool age, a great many unrealizable tendencies and desires emerge.

• It is my believe that if needs that could not be realized immediately did not develop during the school years, there would be no play, because play seems to be invented at the point when the child begins to experience unrealizable tendencies.

Suppose that a very young (perhaps two-and-a-half-year-old) child wants to something—for example, to occupy her mother's role. She wants it at once. If she cannot have it, she may throw a temper tantrum, but she can usually be sidetracked and pacified so that she forgets her desire.

• Toward the beginning of preschool age, when desires that cannot be immediately gratified or forgotten make their appearance and the tendency to immediate fulfillment of desires, characteristic of the preceding stage, is retained, the child's behavior changes.

To resolve this tension, the preschool child enters an imaginary, illusory world in which the unrealizable desires can be realized, **and this world is what we call play**.

• ***Imagination*** *is a new psychological process for the child;*

it is not present in the consciousness of the very young child, is totally absent in animals, and represents a specifically human form of conscious activity. Like all functions of consciousness, it originally arises from action.

The old adage that child's play is imagination in action must be reversed: we can say that imagination in adolescents and school children is play without action.

From this perspective is clear that the pleasure derived from preschool play is controlled by different motives than simple sucking on a pacifier. This is not to say that play arises as the result of every unsatisfied desire (as when, for example, the child wants to ride in the cab, but the wish is not immediately gratified, so the child goes into her room and pretends she is riding in a cab). It rarely happens in just this way. Nor does the presence of such generalized emotions in play mean that the child herself understands the motives giving rise to the game. In this respect play differs substantially from work and other forms of activity.

♦ Thus, in establishing criteria for distinguishing a child's play from other forms of activity, we conclude that in play a child creates an imaginary situation.

This is not a new idea, in the sense that imaginary situations in play have always been recognized; but they were previously regarded as only one example of play activities. The imaginary situation was not considered the defining characteristic of play in general but was treated as an attribute of specific subcategories of play.

♦ I find previous ideas unsatisfactory in three respects.

First, if play is understood as symbolic, there is the danger that it might come to be viewed as an activity akin to algebra; that is, play, like algebra, might be considered a system of signs that generalize reality, with no characteristic that I consider specific to play. The child would be seen as an unsuccessful algebraist who cannot yet write the symbols but can depict them in action. *I believe that play is not symbolic action in the proper sense of the term, so it becomes essential to show the role of motivation in play.* **Second,** this argument stressing the importance of cognitive processes neglects not only the motivation for, but also the circumstances of, the child's activity. **And third,** previous approaches do not help us to understand the role of play in later development.

If all play is really the realization in play form of tendencies that cannot be immediately gratified, then elements of imaginary situations will automatically be a part of the emotional tone of play itself.

♦ Play involving an imaginary situation is, in fact, rule-based play.

Consider the child's activity during play. What does a child's behavior in an imaginary situation mean? We know that development of playing games with rules begins in the late preschool period and develops during school age. A number of investigators, although not belonging to the camp of dialectical materialists, have approached this issue along the lines recommended by Marx when he said that "the anatomy of man is the key to the anatomy of the ape." They have begun their examination of early play in the light of later rule-based play and have concluded from this that play involving an imaginary situation is, in fact, rule-based play.

♦ One could go even further and propose that there is not such thing as play without rules.

• *The imaginary situation of any form of play already contains rules of behavior, although it may not be a game with formulated rules laid down in advance.*

The child imagines himself to be the mother and the doll to be the child, so he must obey the rules of maternal behavior. Sully early noted that, remarkably, young children could make the play situation and reality coincide. He described a case where two sisters, aged five and seven, said to each other, "Let's play sisters." They were playing at reality. In certain cases, I have found it easy to elicit such play in children. It is very easy, for example, to have a child play at being a child while the mother is playing the role of mother, that is, playing at what is actually true. The vital difference, as Sully describes it, is that the child in playing tries to be what she thinks a sister should be. In life the child behaves without thinking that she is her sister's sister. In the game of sisters playing at "sisters," however, they are both concerned with displaying their sisterhood; the fact that two sisters decided to play sisters induces them both to acquire rules of behavior. Only actions that fit these rules are acceptable to the play situation: they dress alike, talk alike, in short, they enact whatever emphasizes their relationship as sisters vis-á-vis adults and strangers. The elder, holding the younger by the hand, may keep telling her about other people: "That is theirs, not ours." This means: "My sister and I act the same, we are treated the same, but others are treated differently." In this example, the emphasis is on the sameness of everything that is connected with the child's concept of a sister; as a result of playing, the child comes to understand that sisters possess a different relationship to each other than to other people. What passes unnoticed by the child in real life becomes a rule of behavior in play.

♦ What would remain if play were structured in such a way that there were no imaginary situation? The rules would remain.

• *Whenever there is an imaginary situation in play, there are rules—no rules that are formulated in advance and change during the course of the game but ones that stem from an imaginary situation.*

Therefore, the notion that a child can behave in an imaginary situation without rules is simply inaccurate. If the child is playing the role of a mother, then she has rules of maternal behavior. The role the child fulfills, and her relation to the object (if the object has changed its meaning), will always stem from the rules.

♦ Just as the imaginary situation has to contains rules of behavior, so every game with rules contains an imaginary situation.

At first it seemed that the investigator's only task in analyzing play was to disclose the hidden rules in all play, but it has been demonstrated that the so-called pure games with rules are essentially games with imaginary situations. Just as the imaginary situation has to contain rules of behavior, so every game with rules contains an imaginary situation. For example, playing chess creates an imaginary situation. Why? Because the knight, king, queen, and so forth can only move in specified ways; because covering and taking pieces are purely chess concepts. Although in the chess game there is no direct substitute for real-life relationship, it is a kind of imaginary situation nevertheless. The simplest game with rules immediately turns into an imaginary situation in the sense that as soon as the game is regulated by certain rules, a number of possibilities for action are ruled out.

♦ Every game with rules contains an imaginary situation in a concealed form.

Just as we were able to show at the beginning that every imaginary situation contains rules in a concealed form, we have also demonstrated the reverse—that every game with rules contains an imaginary situation in a concealed form. □ The development from games with an overt imaginary situation and covert rules to games with overt rules and a covert imaginary situation outlines the evolution of children's play □.

► Action and Meaning in Play

♦ The influence of play on a child's development is enormous.

• Play in an imaginary situation is essentially impossible for a child under three in that it is a novel form of behavior liberating the child from constrains.

To a considerable extent the behavior of a very young child—and to an absolute extent, that of an infant—is determined by the conditions in which the activity takes place, as the experiments of Lewin and others have shown. For example, Lewin's demonstration of the great difficulty a small child has in realizing that he most first turn his back to a stone in order to sit on it illustrates the extent to which a very young child is bound in every action by situational constrains. It is hard to imagine a greater contrast to Lewin's experiments showing the situational constrains on activity than what we observe in play.

♦ It is here that the child learns to act in a cognitive, rather than an externally visual, realm by relying on internal tendencies and motives and not on incentives supplied by external things.

A study by Lewin on the motivating nature of things for a very young child concludes that things dictate to the child what he must do: a door demands to be opened and closed, a staircase to be climbed, a bell to be rung. In short, things have such an inherent motivating force with respect to a very young child's actions and so extensively determine the child's behavior that Lewin arrived at the notion of creating a psychological topology: he expressed mathematically the trajectory of the child's movement in a field according to the distribution of things with varying attracting or repelling forces.

♦ The root of the situational constraints upon a child lies in a central fact of consciousness characteristic of early childhood: the union of motives and perception.

• *At this age perception is generally not an independent but rather an integrated feature of a motor reaction. Every perception is a stimulus to activity.*

Since a situation is communicated psychologically through perception, and since perception is not separated from motivational and motor activity, it is understandable that with her consciousness so structured, the child is constrained by the situation in which she finds herself.

♦ But in play, things lose their determining force. The child sees one thing but acts differently in relation to what he sees. Thus, a condition is reached in which the child begins to act independently of what he sees.

• *Certain brain-damaged patients lose their ability to act independently of what they see.*

□ In considering such patients one can appreciate that the freedom of action adults and more mature children enjoy is not acquired in a flash but has to go through a long process of development □.

♦ Action in imaginary situation teaches the child to guide her behavior not only by immediate perception of objects or by the situation immediately affecting her but also by the meaning of this situation.

• *It is impossible for very young children to separate the field of meaning from the visual field.*

Experiment and day-to-day observation clearly show that *it is impossible for very young children to separate the field of meaning from the visual field* because there is such intimate fusion between meaning and what is seen. Even a child of two years, when asked to repeat the sentence "Tanya is standing up" when Tanya is sitting in front of her, will change it to "Tanya is sitting down". In certain diseases, exactly the same situation is encountered. Goldstein and Gelb described a number of patients who were unable to state something that was not true. Gelb has data of one patient who was left-handed and incapable of writing the sentence "I can write well with my right hand." When looking out of the window on a fine day he was unable to repeat "The weather is nasty today," but would say "The weather is fine." Often we find that a patient with a speech disturbance is incapable of repeating senseless phrases, for example, "Snow is black," while other phrases equally difficult in their grammatical and semantic construction can be repeated.

• *This tie between perception and meaning can be seen in the process of children's speech development.*

You say to the child, “clock,” and he starts looking for the clock. The word originally signifies a particular spatial location.

♦ A divergence between the field of meaning and vision first occurs at preschool age. In play thought is separated from objects and action arises from ideas rather than from things: a piece of wood begins to be a doll and a stick becomes a horse.

• *Action according to rules begins to be determined by ideas and not by objects themselves.*

This is such a reversal of the child’s relation to the real, immediate, concrete situation that it is hard to underestimate its full significance. The child does not do this all at once because it is terribly difficult for a child to sever thought (the meaning of a word) from object.

♦ Play provides a transitional stage in this direction whenever an object (for example, a stick) becomes a pivot for severing the meaning of horse from the real horse.

• *The child cannot as yet detach thought from objects.*

The child’s weakness is that in order to imagine a horse, he needs to define his action by means of using “The-horse-in-the-stick” as the pivot. But all the same, the basic structure determining the child’s relation to reality is radically changed at this crucial point, because the structure of his perceptions changes.

♦ The structure of human perception could be figuratively expressed as a ratio in which the object is the numerator and the meaning is the denominator (object/meaning). This ratio symbolizes the idea that all human perception is made up of generalized rather than isolated perceptions.

• *For the child the object dominates in the object/meaning ratio and meaning is subordinated to it.*

As I discussed in early chapters, a special feature of human perception (one arising at a very early age) is the so-called perception of real objects, that is, the perception of not only colors and shapes, but also meaning. This is something to which there is no analogy in animal perception. Humans do not merely see something round and black with two hands; they see a clock and can distinguish one thing from another. Thus, the structure of human perception could be figuratively expressed as a ratio in which the object is the numerator and the meaning is the denominator (object/meaning). This ratio symbolizes the idea that all human perception is made up of generalized rather than isolated perceptions. For the child the object dominates in the object/meaning ratio and meaning is subordinated to it.

♦ At the crucial moment when a stick becomes the pivot for detaching the meaning of horse from a real horse, this ratio is inverted and meaning predominates, giving meaning/object.

• *This is not to say that properties of things as such have no meaning. Any stick can be a horse but, for example, a postcard cannot be a horse for a child.*

Goethe’s contention that in play anything can be anything for a child is incorrect. Of course, for adults who can make conscious use of symbols, a postcard can be a horse. If I want to show the location of something, I can put

down a match and say, “This is a horse.” That would be enough. For a child it cannot be a horse because one must use a stick; because of the lack of free substitution, the child’s activity is play and not symbolism. A symbol is a sign, but the stick does not function as the sign of a horse for the child, who retains the properties of things but changes their meaning. Their meaning, in play, becomes the central point and objects are moved from a dominant to a subordinate position.

The child at play operates with meaning detached from their objects and actions; however, a highly interesting contradiction arises in which he fuses real actions and real objects. This characterizes the transitional nature of play; it is a stage between the purely situational constraints of early childhood and adult thought, which can be totally free of real situations.

♦ Through play the child achieves a functional definition of concepts or objects, and words become part of a thing.

• When the stick becomes the pivot for detaching the meaning of “horse” from a real horse, the child makes one object influence another semantically.

He cannot detach meaning from an object, or a word from an object, except by finding a pivot in something else. Transfer of meaning is facilitated by the fact that the child accepts a word as the property of a thing; he sees not the word but the thing it designates. For a child the word “horse” applied to the stick means “there is a horse,” because mentally he sees the object standing behind the word. A vital transitional stage toward operating with meanings occurs when a child first acts with meaning as with objects (as when he acts with the stick as though it were a horse). Later he carries out these acts consciously. This change is seen, too, in the fact that before a child has acquired grammatical and written language, he knows how to do things but does not know that he knows. He does not master these activities voluntarily. In play a child spontaneously makes use of this ability to separate meaning from an object without knowing he is doing it, just as he does not know he is speaking in prose but talks without paying attention to the words. Thus, through play the child achieves a functional definition of concepts or objects, and words become part of a thing.

♦ The creation of an imaginary situation is not a fortuitous fact in a child’s life, but is rather the first manifestation of the child’s emancipation from situational constraints.

• Two paradoxes of play

The primary paradox of play is that the child operates with an alienated meaning in a real situation. **The second** paradox is that in play she adopts the line of least resistance— she does what she most feels like doing because play is connected with pleasure—and at the same time she learns to follow the line of greatest resistance by subordinating herself to rules and thereby renouncing what she wants, since subjection to rules and renunciation of impulsive action constitute the path to maximum pleasure in play.

♦ Play continually creates demands on the child to act against immediate impulse.

• At every step the child is faced with a conflict between the rules of the game and what he would do if he could suddenly act spontaneously. In the game he acts counter to the way he wants to act.

• A child’s greatest self-control occurs in play.

He achieves the maximum display of willpower when he renounces an immediate attraction in the game (such as candy, which by the rules of the game he is forbidden to eat because it represents something inedible). Ordinarily a child experiences subordination to rules in the renunciation of something he wants, but here subordination to a rule and renunciation of action on immediate impulse are the means to maximum pleasure.

♦ **Thus, the essential attribute of play is a rule that has become a desire.**

• *Spinoza's notions of "an idea which has become a desire, a concept which has turned into a passion" finds its prototype in play, which is the realm of spontaneity and freedom.*

To carry out the rule is a source of pleasure. The rule wins because it is the strongest impulse. Such a rule is an internal rule, a rule of self-restraint and self-determination, as Piaget says, and not a rule the child obeys like a physical law. In short, *play gives a child a new form of desires.* It teaches her to desire by relating her desires to a fictitious "I," to her role in the game and its rules.

□ *In this way a child's greatest achievements are possible in play, achievements that tomorrow will become her basic level of real action and morality* □.

► Separating Action and Meaning

♦ **Now we can say the same thing about the child's activity that we said about objects.**

• *Just as we had the* $\frac{object}{meaning}$ *ratio, we also have the* $\frac{\text{action}}{\text{meaning}}$ *ratio. Whereas action dominates early in development, this structure is inverted; meaning becomes the numerator, while action takes the place of the denominator.*

♦ **A child does not behave in a purely symbolic fashion in play; rather he wishes and realizes his wishes by letting the basic categories of reality pass through his experience. The child, in wishing, carries out his wishes. In thinking, he acts**.

• *Internal and external action are inseparable: imagination, interpretation, and will are the internal processes carried by external action.*

In a child of preschool age, action is initially dominant over the meaning and is incompletely understood. The child is able to do more than he can understand. But it is at this age that an action structure first arises in which

meaning is the determinant, although meaning must influence the child's behavior within constraints provided by structural features of the action. Children, in playing at eating from a plate, have been shown to perform actions with their hands reminiscent of real eating, while all actions that did not designate eating were impossible. Throwing one's hands back instead of stretching them toward the plate turned out to be impossible, for such an action would have a destructive effect on the game. A child does not behave in a purely symbolic fashion in play; rather he wishes and realizes his wishes by letting the basic categories of reality pass through his experience. The child, in wishing, carries out his wishes. In thinking, he acts. Internal and external action are inseparable: imagination, interpretation, and will are the internal processes carried by external action. What was said about detaching meaning from objects applies equally well to the child's own actions. A child who stamps on the ground and imagines herself riding a horse has thereby inverted the $\frac{\text{action}}{\text{meaning}}$ ratio to $\frac{\text{meaning}}{\text{action}}$.

♦ **The developmental history of the relation between meaning and action is analogous to the development history of *the meaning/object* relation.**

• *In order to detach the meaning of the action from the real action (riding a horse, without the opportunity to do so), the child requires a pivot in the form of an action to replace the real one.*

• *While action begins as the numerator of the* $\frac{\text{action}}{\text{meaning}}$ *structure, now the structure is inverted and meaning becomes the numerator. Action retreats to second place and becomes the pivot; meaning is again detached from action by means of a different action.*

This is another example of the way in which human behavior comes to depend upon operations based on meaning where the motive that initiates the behavior is sharply separated from fulfillment.

□ The separation of meaning from objects and action has different consequences, however. Just as operating with the meaning of *things* leads to abstract thought, we find that the development of will, the ability to make conscious choice, occurs when the child operates with the meaning of *actions*. In play, an action replaces another action just as an object replaces another object □.

♦ How does the child float from one object to another, from one action to another? This is accomplished by the movement in the field of meaning—which subordinates all real objects and actions to itself.

• *Behavior is not bound by the immediate perceptual field. This movement in the field of meaning predominates in play.*

On the one hand, it represents movement in an abstract field (which thus makes an appearance in play prior to the appearance of voluntary operation with meanings). On the other hand, the method of the movement is situational and concrete. (It is an affective, not a logical change). In other words, the field of meaning appears, but action within it occurs just as in reality. Herein lies the main developmental contradiction of play.

C O N C L U S I O N

I would like to close this discussion of play by showing first that play is not the dominant feature of childhood but it is a leading factor in development. Second, I want to demonstrate the significance of the change from predominant of the imaginary situation to predominance of rules in the development of play itself. And third, I want to point out internal transformations in the child's development brought about by play.

How does play relate to development? In fundamental, everyday situations a child's behavior is the opposite of his behavior in play. In play, action is subordinated to meaning, but in real life, of course, action dominates meaning. Therefore, to consider play as the prototype of a child's everyday activity and its predominant form is completely incorrect.

This is the main flaw in Koffka's theory. He considers play as child's other world. Everything that concerns a child is play reality, while everything that concerns an adult is serious reality. A given object has one meaning in play and another outside of it. In a child's world the logic of wishes and of satisfying urges dominates, and not real logic. The illusory nature of play is transferred to life. This would all be true if play were indeed the predominant form of a child's activity, even if only partially transferred to real life. But it is difficult to accept the insane picture that comes to mind if the form of activity we have been speaking of were to become the predominant form of a child's everyday activity, even if only partially transferred to real life.

Koffka gives a number of examples to show how a child transfers a situation from a play into life. But the ubiquitous transference of play behavior

to real life could only be regarded as an unhealthy symptom. To behave in a real situation as in an illusory one is the first sign of delirium. Play behavior in real life is normally seen only in the type of game when children begin to play at what they are in fact doing, evidently creating associations that facilitate the execution of an unpleasant action (as when children who do not want to go to bed say, "Let's play that it's nighttime and we have to go to sleep"). Thus, it seems to me that play is not the predominant type of activity at preschool age. Only theories which maintain that a child does not have to satisfy the basic requirements of life but can live in search of pleasure could possibly suggest that a child's world is a play world.

Looking at the matter from the opposite perspective, could one suppose that a child's behavior is always guiding by meaning, that a preschooler behavior is so arid that he never behaves spontaneously simply because he thinks he should behave otherwise? This strict subordination to rules is quite impossible in life, but in play it does become possible: thus, play creates a zone of proximal development of the child. In play a child always behaves beyond his average age, above his daily behavior; in play it is as though he were a head taller than himself. As in the focus of a magnifying glass, play contains all developmental tendencies in a condensed form and is itself a major source of development.

Though the play-development relationship can be compared to the instruction-development relationship, play provides a much wider background for changes in needs and consciousness. Action in the imaginative sphere, in an imaginary situation, the creation of voluntary intentions, and the formation of real-life plans and volitional motives—all appear in play and make it the highest level of preschool development. The child moves forward essentially through play activity. Only in this sense can play be considered a leading activity that determines the child's development.

How does play change? It is remarkable that the child starts with an imaginary situation that initially is very close to the real one. A reproduction of the real situation takes place. For example, a child playing with a doll repeats almost exactly what his mother does with him. This means that in the original situation rules operate in a condensed and compressed form. There is very little of the imaginary. It is an imaginary situation, but it is only comprehensible in the light of a real situation that has just occurs. Play is more nearly recollection of something that has actually happened than imagination. It is more memory in action that a novel imaginary situation.

As play develops, we see a movement toward the conscious realization of its purpose. The purpose decides the game and justifies the activity. It is incorrect to conceive of play as activity without purpose. In athletic games one can win or lose; in a race one can come in first, second, or last. In short, the purpose decides the game and justifies the activity. Purpose, as the ultimate goal, determines the child's affective attitude to play. When running a race, a child can be highly agitated or distressed and little pleasure may remain because she finds it physically painful to run, and if she is overtaken she will experience little functional pleasure. In sports the purpose of the game is one of its dominant features, without which there would be no point—like examining a piece of candy, putting it into one's mouth, chewing it, and then spitting it out. In such play, the object, which is to win, is recognized in advance.

At the of the development, rules emerge, and the more rigid they are the greater the demands on the child's application, the greater the regulation of the child's activity, the more tense and acute play becomes. Simply running around without purpose or rules is boring and does not appeal to children. Consequently, a complex of originally undeveloped features comes to the fore at the end of play development—features that had been secondary or incidental in the beginning occupy a central position at the end, and vice versa.

In one sense a child at play is free to determine his own actions. But in another sense this is an illusory freedom, for his actions are in fact subordinated to the meanings of things, and he acts accordingly.

From the point of view of development, creating an imaginary situation can be regarded as a means of developing abstract thought. The corresponding development of rules leads to actions on the basis of which the division between work and play becomes possible, a division encountered at school age as a fundamental fact.

As figuratively expressed by one investigator, play for a child under three is a serious game, just as it is for an adolescent; although, of course, in a different sense of the word; serious play for a very young child means that she play without separating the imaginary situation from the real one. For the school child, play becomes a more limited form of activity, predominantly of the athletic type, which fills a specific role in the school child's development but lacks the significance of play for the preschooler. At school age play does not die away but permeates the attitude toward reality. It has its own inner continuation in school instruction and work (compulsory activity based on rules). *It is the essence of play that a new relation is created between the field of*

meaning and the visual field—that is, between situations in thought and real situations.

Superficially, play bears little resemblance to the complex, mediated form of thought and volition it leads to. Only a profound internal analysis makes it possible to determine its course of change and its role in development.

REVIEW

To define play as an activity that gives pleasure to the child is inaccurate for two reasons. First, many activities gives the child much keener experiences of pleasure than play, for example, sucking a pacifier, even though the child is not being satiated. And Second, there are games in which the activity itself is not pleasurable, for example, games, predominantly at the end of preschool and the beginning of school age, that give pleasure only if the child finds the result interesting. Sporting games (not only athletic sports, but other games that can be won or lost) are very often accompanied by displeasure when the outcome is unfavorable to the child.

But while pleasure cannot be regarded as the defining characteristic of play, it seems to me that theories which ignore the fact that play fulfills children's needs result in a pedantic intellectualization of play.

If we ignore the child's needs, and the incentives which are effective in getting him to act, we will never be able to understand his advance from one developmental stage to the next, because every advance is connected with a marked change in motives, inclinations, and incentives. The maturing of needs is a dominant issue in this discussion because it is impossible to ignore the fact that the child satisfies certain needs in play. *If we do not understand the special character of these needs, we cannot understand the uniqueness of play as a form of activity.*

A very young child tends to gratify her desires immediately; normally the interval between a desire and its fulfillment is extremely short. No one has met a child under three years old who wants to do something a few days in the future. However, at the preschool age, a great many unrealizable tendencies and desires emerge.

It is my believe that if needs that could not be realized immediately did not develop during the school years, there would be no play, because play seems to be invented at the point when the child begins to experience unrealizable tendencies.

Toward the beginning of preschool age, when desires that cannot be immediately gratified or forgotten make their appearance and the tendency to immediate fulfillment of desires, characteristic of the preceding stage, is retained, the child's behavior changes. To resolve this tension, the preschool child enters an imaginary, illusory world in which the unrealizable desires can be realized, and this world is what we call play.

Imagination is a new psychological process for the child; it is not present in the consciousness of the very young child, is totally absent in animals, and represents a specifically human form of conscious activity. Like all functions of consciousness, it originally arises from action.

The old adage that child's play is imagination in action must be reversed: we can say that imagination in adolescents and school children is play without action.

From this perspective is clear that the pleasure derived from preschool play is controlled by different motives than simple sucking on a pacifier. This is not to say that play arises as the result of every unsatisfied desire. Thus, in establishing criteria for distinguishing a child's play from other forms of activity, we conclude that in play a child creates an imaginary situation.

Play involving an imaginary situation is, in fact, rule-based play. One could go even further and propose that there is not such thing as play without rules. The imaginary situation of any form of play already contains rules of behavior, although it may not be a game with formulated rules laid down in advance.

What would remain if play were structured in such a way that there were no imaginary situation? The rules would remain. Whenever there is an imaginary situation in play, there are rules—no rules that are formulated in advance and change during the course of the game but ones that stem from an imaginary situation.

Therefore, the notion that a child can behave in an imaginary situation without rules is simply inaccurate. If the child is playing the role of a mother, then she has rules of maternal behavior. The role the child fulfills, and her relation to the object (if the object has changed its meaning), will always stem from the rules.

Just as the imaginary situation has to contains rules of behavior, so every game with rules contains an imaginary situation. For example, playing chess creates an imaginary situation. Why? Because the knight, king, queen, and so forth can only move in specified ways; because covering and taking pieces are purely chess concepts. Although in the chess game there is no direct substitute for real-life relationship, it is a kind of imaginary situation nevertheless. The simplest game with rules immediately turns into an imaginary situation in the sense that as soon as the game is regulated by certain rules, a number of possibilities for action are ruled out.

Just as we were able to show at the beginning that every imaginary situation contains rules in a concealed form, we have also demonstrated the reverse—that every game with rules contains an imaginary situation in a concealed form. The development from games with an overt imaginary situation and covert rules to games with overt rules and a covert imaginary situation outlines the evolution of children's play.

Action and Meaning in Play

The influence of play on a child's development is enormous. Play in an imaginary situation is essentially impossible for a child under three in that it is a novel form of behavior liberating the child from constrains.

To a considerable extent the behavior of a very young child—and to an absolute extent, that of an infant—is determined by the conditions in which the activity takes place, as the experiments of Lewin and others have shown. For example, Lewin's demonstration of the great difficulty a small child has in realizing that he most first turn his back to a stone in order to sit on it illustrates the extent to which a very young child is bound in every action by situational constrains. It is hard to imagine a greater contrast to Lewin's experiments showing the situational constrains on activity than what we observe in play.

It is here that the child learns to act in a cognitive, rather than an externally visual, realm by relying on internal tendencies and motives and not on incentives supplied by external things. A study by Lewin on the motivating nature of things for a very young child concludes that things dictate to the child what he must do: a door demands to be opened and closed, a staircase to be climbed, a bell to be rung. In short, things have such an inherent motivating force with respect to a very young child's actions and so extensively determine the child's behavior that Lewin arrived at the notion of creating a psychological topology: he expressed mathematically the trajectory of the child's movement in a field according to the distribution of things with varying attracting or repelling forces.

The root of the situational constraints upon a child lies in a central fact of consciousness characteristic of early childhood: the union of motives and perception. At this age perception is generally not an independent but rather an integrated feature of a motor reaction. Every perception is a stimulus to activity.

Since a situation is communicated psychologically through perception, and since perception is not separated from motivational and motor activity, it is understandable that with her consciousness so structured, the child is constrained by the situation in which she finds herself.

But in play, things lose their determining force. The child sees one thing but acts differently in relation to what he sees. Thus, a condition is reached in which the child begins to act independently of what he sees. Certain brain-damaged patients lose their ability to act independently of what they see. In considering such patients one can appreciate that the freedom of action adults and more mature children enjoy is not acquired in a flash but has to go through a long process of development.

Action in imaginary situation teaches the child to guide her behavior not only by immediate perception of objects or by the situation immediately affecting her but also by the meaning of this situation. It is impossible for very

young children to separate the field of meaning from the visual field because there is such intimate fusion between meaning and what is seen. Even a child of two years, when asked to repeat the sentence "Tanya is standing up" when Tanya is sitting in front of her, will change it to "Tanya is sitting down". This tie between perception and meaning can be seen in the process of children's speech development. You say to the child, "clock," and he starts looking for the clock. The word originally signifies a particular spatial location.

A divergence between the field of meaning and vision first occurs at preschool age. In play thought is separated from objects and action arises from ideas rather than from things: a piece of wood begins to be a doll and a stick becomes a horse. Action according to rules begins to be determined by ideas and not by objects themselves. This is such a reversal of the child's relation to the real, immediate, concrete situation that it is hard to underestimate its full significance. The child does not do this all at once because it is terribly difficult for a child to sever thought (the meaning of a word) from object.

Play provides a transitional stage in this direction whenever an object (for example, a stick) becomes a pivot for severing the meaning of horse from the real horse. The child cannot as yet detach thought from objects. The child's weakness is that in order to imagine a horse, he needs to define his action by means of using "The-horse-in-the-stick" as the pivot. The basic structure determining the child's relation to reality is radically changed at this crucial point, because the structure of his perceptions changes.

As I discussed in early chapters, a special feature of human perception (one arising at a very early age) is the so-called perception of real objects, that is, the perception of not only colors and shapes, but also meaning. This is something to which there is no analogy in animal perception. Humans do not merely see something round and black with two hands; they see a clock and can distinguish one thing from another. Thus, the structure of human perception could be figuratively expressed as a ratio in which the object is the numerator and the meaning is the denominator (*object/meaning*). This ratio symbolizes the idea that all human perception is made up of generalized rather than isolated perceptions. For the child the object dominates in the *object/meaning* ratio and meaning is subordinated to it.

At the crucial moment when a stick becomes the pivot for detaching the meaning of horse from a real horse, this ratio is inverted and meaning predominates, giving meaning/object. This is not to say that properties of things as such have no meaning. Any stick can be a horse but, for example, a postcard cannot be a horse for a child.

The child at play operates with meaning detached from their objects and actions; however, a highly interesting contradiction arises in which he fuses real actions and real objects. This characterizes the transitional nature of play; it is a stage between the purely situational constraints of early childhood and adult thought, which can be totally free of real situations.

Through play the child achieves a functional definition of concepts or objects, and words become part of a thing. When the stick becomes the pivot for detaching the meaning of "horse" from a real horse, the child makes one object influence another semantically. He cannot detach meaning from an object, or a word from an object, except by finding a pivot in something else. Transfer of meaning is facilitated by the fact that the child accepts a word as the property of a thing; he sees not the word but the thing it designates. For a child the word "horse" applied to the stick means "there is a horse," because mentally he sees the object standing behind the word. A vital transitional stage toward operating with meanings occurs when a child first acts with meaning as with objects (as when he acts with the stick as though it were a horse).

The creation of an imaginary situation is not a fortuitous fact in a child's life, but is rather the first manifestation of the child's emancipation from situational constraints. The primary paradox of play is that the child operates with an alienated meaning in a real situation. The second paradox is that in play she adopts the line of least resistance— she does what she most feels like doing because play is connected with pleasure—and at the same time she learns to follow the line of greatest resistance by subordinating herself to rules and thereby renouncing what she wants, since subjection to rules and renunciation of impulsive action constitute the path to maximum pleasure in play.

Play continually creates demands on the child to act against immediate impulse. At every step the child is faced with a conflict between the rules of the game and what he would do if he could suddenly act spontaneously. In the game he acts counter to the way he wants to act. A child's greatest self-control occurs in play. He achieves the maximum display of willpower when he renounces an immediate attraction in the game (such as candy, which by the rules of the game he is forbidden to eat because it represents something inedible). Ordinarily a child experiences subordination to rules in the renunciation of something he wants, but here subordination to a rule and renunciation of action on immediate impulse are the means to maximum pleasure.

Thus, the essential attribute of play is a rule that has become a desire. Spinoza's notions of "an idea which has become a desire, a concept which has turned into a passion" finds its prototype in play, which is the realm of spontaneity and freedom. To carry out the rule is a source of pleasure. The rule wins because it is the strongest impulse. Such a rule is an internal rule, a rule of self-restraint and self-determination, as Piaget says, and not a rule the child obeys like a physical law. In short, play gives a child a new form of desires. It teaches her to desire by relating her desires to a fictitious "I," to her role in the game and its rules.

□ *In this way a child's greatest achievements are possible in play, achievements that tomorrow will become her basic level of real action and morality* □.

Separating Action and Meaning

Now we can say the same thing about the child's activity that we said about objects. Just as we had the *object/meaning* ratio, we also have the *action/meaning* ratio. Whereas action dominates early in development, this structure is inverted; meaning becomes the numerator, while action takes the place of the denominator.

In a child of preschool age, action is initially dominant over the meaning and is incompletely understood. The child is able to do more than he can understand. But it is at this age that an action structure first arises in which meaning is the determinant, although meaning must influence the child's behavior within constraints provided by structural features of the action. A child does not behave in a purely symbolic fashion in play; rather he wishes and realizes his wishes by letting the basic categories of reality pass through his experience. The child, in wishing, carries out his wishes. In thinking, he acts. Internal and external action are inseparable: imagination, interpretation, and will are the internal processes carried by external action. What was said about detaching meaning from objects applies equally well to the child's own actions. A child who stamps on the ground and imagines herself riding a horse has thereby inverted the *action/meaning* ratio to *meaning/action.*

The developmental history of the relation between meaning and action is analogous to the development history of the *meaning/object* relation. In order to detach the meaning of the action from the real action (riding a horse, without the opportunity to do so), the child requires a pivot in the form of an action to replace the real one. While action begins as the numerator of the *action/meaning* structure, now the structure is inverted and meaning becomes the numerator.

Action retreats to second place and becomes the pivot; meaning is again detached from action by means of a different action. This is another example of the way in which human behavior comes to depend upon operations based on meaning where the motive that initiates the behavior is sharply separated from fulfillment. The separation of meaning from objects and action has different consequences, however. Just as operating with the meaning of *things* leads to abstract thought, we find that the development of will, the ability to make conscious choice, occurs when the child operates with the meaning of *actions*. In play, an action replaces another action just as an object replaces another object.

How does the child float from one object to another, from one action to another? This is accomplished by the movement in the field of meaning—which subordinates all real objects and actions to itself. Behavior is not bound by the immediate perceptual field. This movement in the field of meaning predominates in play. On the one hand, it represents movement in an abstract field (which thus makes an appearance in play prior to the appearance of voluntary operation with meanings). On the other hand, the method of the movement is situational and concrete. (It is an affective, not a logical change). In other words, the field of meaning appears, but action within it occurs just as in reality. Herein lies the main developmental contradiction of play.