

# To Be is an Answer; Not to Be is the Question: Action, Understanding, and Human Mediation

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The first lesson we learn from Vygotsky is that psychological functions, in their mature state, present as knots, or tapestries, can only be understood if they are undone and the generative processes of their formation revealed. Vygotsky's distinctive contribution to our understanding is grounded in his concept of human mediation. The Vygotskian paradigm is often cast in opposition to or in contrast to that of Piaget and is often captured, if not caricatured, in the statement that '[t]he path from object to child and from child to object passes through another person' (Vygotsky 1978:30). The other person is a 'social other' who serves as a cultural guide and inducts the developing child into the surrounding social milieu. The emphasis Vygotsky places on the role of this mediator of the child's actions, beliefs, and understandings, is evident in his claim that is virtually synonymous with his name:

Every function in the child's cultural development appear twice: first on the social level, and later, on the individual level; first *between* people (*interpsychological*), and then *inside* the child (*intrapsychological*) (Vygotsky 1978:57).

But to understand the psychological implications of that distinctive form of human action that Vygotsky called mediation, we need to penetrate into its functional structure, or way of working. The social other who guides, shapes, informs, and regulates the child's activities is an intentional agent and one possible point of entry is to begin by attempting to unravel the concept of

agency in order to understand the conditions of its genesis.

A theory of mediation entails an account not only of the mediator as a purposeful or intentional agent but also of the recipient of mediation, the *mediatee*, for whom mediation is experienced as a happening that is not of his/her own making. In the same way that Bakhtin (1981:293) argues that 'The word in language is half someone else's' so mediated actions are half someone or something else's. Wertsch (1991:33,38) refers to 'The agent of mediated action' and to 'agency as mediated' and, in this mediated sense, agency represents a partnership in which ownership of action is distributed unevenly between the actors. But in using the term 'mediated' as a modifier of agent or agency, Wertsch seems to miss or omit the psychological significance of mediation. Mediated actions are not performed by *agents* and to the extent that action is mediated, agency is undermined. Wertsch's (1991:12) argument that 'mediational means shape the action in essential ways' obscures the point that it is not the means as such (tools, language) but the effects produced by the means, the happenings brought about in conjunction with an enabling or constraining intermediary that impact on the mediatee<sup>1</sup>. The fact that tools (material and symbolic) mediate between actions and their effects/ consequences and that they prescribe or constrain the kinds of actions that can be performed, places the mediatee in the role of an actor whose actions are regulated from without. In this sense, agency is the antithesis of mediation whose central psychological feature entails a surrender of agency by the mediatee and submission or subordination to the *other*.

The concepts of action and agency conflate doings and happenings in the person of an agent who is both the subject of doings and the object of happenings. This serves to obscure the formative psychological processes that generate the condition of agency. By treating the same actor who performs, and for whom the performance is enacted, as an *agent*, we lose sight of the psychological processes that make the condition of agency possible. An action is something that not only is done, a doing, but is also something that happens. A cup of coffee may *happen* to me through the agency of considerate others or as a result of my own actions. We typically distinguish between these two conditions by using the grammatical terms *I* and *me* and these terms can be

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<sup>1</sup> This is the point of the distinction Newman and Holzman (1993:37-41) make between tool-for-result and tool-and-result.

mapped onto the psychological categories of *ego* and *self*<sup>2</sup>. Harré (1998:178) contends that although the concept of self is a useful fiction, it has 'generated an ocean of metaphysics' and that '[b]y paying attention to the forms of expression of the sense of self we have condensed this ocean into a drop a grammar'. The terms *ego* and *self* do not negate or dilute Harré's insistence that the basic ontological particulars in the human world are persons but whether they amount to mere grammatical fictions is more contentious<sup>3</sup>. William James (1962: 189) commented that,

the total self of me, being as it were duplex, partly known and partly knower, partly object and partly subject, must have two aspects discriminated in it, of which for shortness we may call one the *Me* and the other the *I*.

These categories correspond to Vygotsky's (1987:256) distinction between 'perceptive consciousness' and 'intellectual consciousness', what James (1962:26) called 'knowledge of Acquaintance' and 'knowledge About', and also to the contrast Ingold (1986:312) draws between a practical or presentational awareness of doing, and a conceptual or representational consciousness that saturates happenings with an understanding of what they are about. This distinction between an *awareness of* and a *consciousness about*<sup>4</sup> reflects two different aspects or qualities of our experience and suggests a bi-polar or, to use James' expression, 'duplex' conception of our subjectivity that can be captured in the terms *ego* and *self*. The *ego* is the aware subject of purposeful actions that begin with reasons and end with the realization of goals. In contrast or as a complement to the *ego*, the *self* is the

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<sup>2</sup> The term 'psychological categories' is used to indicate that *ego* and *self* do not refer to entities but to kinds of events. As theoretical constructs they are analogous (but not necessarily equivalent) to the concepts of phenotype and genotype. As Flanagan (1994:205) points out 'The idea that the self is a fiction is compatible with its being real and its playing a functional role in an individual's psychological economy and social life'.

<sup>3</sup> For a comprehensive critique of Harré, see Archer (2000:86-117) and for an alternative approach see Dennett (1993:412-430)

<sup>4</sup> See Dennett's (1997:25-73) comments about intentionality and what he calls the intentional stance

conscious predicative aspect of subjectivity<sup>5</sup>, the locus or centre of understanding without which reasons are reduced to motives and actions to behaviours. In some respects, this conception of *ego* is similar to what Harré (1998) identifies as self1 in his triplex of selves that together represent aspects of what we mean (or should mean) by the term persons. According to Harré (1998:3), self1 (in contrast to self2 and self3) is a locus or 'site from which a person perceives the world and a place from which to act'. But Harré's self2 (a person's unique set of attributes) and self3 (the impression a person makes on others) that are anchored to self1 (rather like a camera mounted on a mobile tripod) seem to neglect or omit a crucial part of what it means to be a person. In discussing what he calls 'the most essential difference between man and animal', Ortega (1957:17f) alerts us to an aspect of our subjectivity that seems anterior to Harré's triplet of selves.

Observe that this marvelous faculty that man possesses of temporarily freeing himself from his slavery to things implies two very different powers: one is his ability to ignore the world for a greater or lesser time without fatal risk; the other is his having somewhere to take his stand, to be, when he has virtually left the world .... But the world is the whole of exteriority, the absolute *without*, which can have no other *without* beyond itself. The only possible without to this *without* is, precisely, a *within*, an *intus*, the inwardness of man, his *self*, which is principally made up of ideas.

This conception of *self*, not as a site from which to perceive and act on the world without but as an inner site or locus of understanding, is crucial in the context of a theory of mediation. All forms of mediation consist of directives for the mediatee to act in particular ways but the actions produced by the mediatee, as a consequence of other-regulation, have their origin in the

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<sup>5</sup> Discussing inner speech, Vygotsky (1987:248,243) points out that there is a 'preponderance of sense over meaning' and that predication is its natural form: 'psychologically, it consists of predicates only'. Another feature of inner speech is that it lacks what Bakhtin (1986:99) calls 'addressivity'. Rather than an utterance that is spoken, inner speech has the quality of a voice that is heard. When we talk to ourselves, we listen rather than speak. We hear ourselves thinking and in this sense inner speech is more a happening than a doing.

understanding that constitutes the *self* of the mediator and it is this understanding that grounds the mediator's intentions (or her reasons for acting in a particular way). In a novel situation in which new understanding must be acquired, the mediatee is of course aware of the actions she/he performs but not of what the actions are about. For example, consider a situation in which a child who has never before encountered a pair of scissors is shown how to use them by indicating to the child where to insert the thumb and finger and how to place the blades in relation to the cutting surface. In this *mediated situation* the aboutness of scissors, their cutting function, is then revealed as a happening or performance that emerges out of the child's actions. But, for the child as mediatee, the understanding that the scissor is about a way of cutting is not initially constitutive of that action. In the sense of other-regulation, mediation then involves the interception of the *self* of the mediatee, that is the pre-understandings that constitute the consciousness of the mediatee, and the substituting of the *self* (or understanding) of the mediator. The relational notion of *pre-understanding* is central to an analysis of mediated learning. Gadamer used the terms *prejudice* and *tradition* to express the taken-for-granted quality of the (pre-)understanding that we impose on our experience.

Long before we understand ourselves through the process of self-examination, we understand ourselves in a self-evident way in the family, society and state in which we live. The focus of subjectivity is a distorting mirror. The self-awareness of the individual is only a flickering in the closed circuits of historical life. That is why the prejudices of the individual, far more than his judgments, constitute the historical reality of his being (Gadamer 1975:245).

Ortega (1960:49) expressed much the same idea using the terms *habituality* and *blindness*.

These instances of blindness vary from one period to another but they are never absent .... Every idea is thought, every picture painted, out of certain assumptions or conventions which are so basic, so firmly fixed for the one who thought the idea or who painted the picture that he neither pays heed to them, nor, for that matter, introduces them into his picture or his idea; nor do we find them there in any guise except as pre-supposed and left, as it were, at one side. This is why we

sometimes fail to understand an idea or a picture; we lack the clue to the enigma, the key to the secret convention.

In a mediated learning<sup>6</sup> situation, or to use Vygotsky's catch-phrase of the zone of proximal development, the mediator and mediatee do not share (by definition) a common understanding of the situation. It is for this reason that mediated learning cannot be modelled on dialogue or the dynamics that govern a conversation between interlocutors. Mediation and dialogue are different kinds of communication that serve different purposes. In dialogue, meanings or understandings are exchanged whereas mediation is concerned with the learning and teaching of new understanding in situations where prior understanding is inadequate. As Voloshinov (1973:102) points out: 'Any true understanding is dialogic in nature. Understanding is to utterance as one line of dialogue is to the next'. But in situations of not-understanding or misunderstanding dialogue breaks down and a different form of communication is required to restore what Bakhtin (1981:275) calls the 'primordial dialogism of discourse'.

Drawing on the idea of discourse as 'language-event', Ricoeur (1983:197-221) proposes that text can serve as a model for the interpretation of the kinds of 'meaningful actions' that we encounter in the human sciences. At the core of Ricoeur's model is his concept of *appropriation* that is the counterpart of the distanciation that is inherent in the nature of text that mediates between author and reader. The critical point that Ricoeur<sup>7</sup> makes is that 'appropriation does not imply any direct congeniality of one soul with another' and that '[n]othing is less inter-subjective or dialogical than the

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<sup>6</sup> The term 'mediated learning' compounds two problems. The acid test for a theory of learning is that it must address the problem of novelty and avoid the learning (Meno) paradox such that existing understanding cannot be the basis for new understanding. (The common and persistently fashionable wisdom that learning should proceed from the known/familiar to the unknown/unfamiliar seems to fall foul of this paradox.) The bottom line for a theory of mediation is that it must avoid an infinite regress of teachers' teachers. (As an explanatory concept, imitation, in its various guises including 'scaffolding', seems to fall headlong into this trap.)

<sup>7</sup> In stark contrast to Ricoeur's model of the text, Harré (1998: 45) argues that 'A useful model for skilled action, that is action that is intentional and normatively constrained, is conversation'.

encounter with a text' (Ricoeur 1983:191). In a novel situation, the task for the mediatee is to appropriate new understanding that dislodges existing pre-understanding whereas for the mediator, the task is to entrench her understanding by disseminating it through what is essentially a monologue, in the sense that instruction does not require or invite an exchange of ideas. The effect of mediation, then, is to reduce an agent to an actor whose other-regulated actions are now experienced as happenings by the *self*. Ricoeur uses the terms 'relinquishment' and 'letting go' to capture what he calls a 'fundamental moment of appropriation' in which 'the ego divests itself of itself' (Ricoeur 1983:191). In this sense, the acquisition of understanding that scissors are about cutting is not something that the actor *does* with scissors but something that *happens* to the actor (or that scissors do to the actor) in the course of acting in conjunction with the scissors. In performing a set of actions, the child or novice is *aware* of the situation, what she is doing, what the scissors are doing, and her part in that doing. But this awareness of doing is a different experience from that constituted by a prior understanding of the aboutness of scissors<sup>8</sup>. Once that understanding is acquired, the awareness of the scissor-object is transformed into a consciousness about scissor-as-cutting-object.

The quality of experience that we call consciousness is a property of the *self* whose mode of being is understanding<sup>9</sup>. This is not to suggest that the *self* is the complement of the Cartesian Ego that presides over our acquired understandings that increase with experience. On the contrary, it is our understanding that constitutes our sense of self or selfhood, and about which we are conscious. To be conscious of happenings is to understand and understanding is not something we do but something that happens to us.

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<sup>8</sup> The aboutness and awareness of scissors corresponds to the distinction Heidegger (1980:102-114) makes between ready-to-hand and present-to-hand.

<sup>9</sup> Although Heidegger is not addressed explicitly in the text, the concept of self that is elaborated is not far removed from that of *Dasein*. Although not by design, *Being and Time* seems to provide a common thread that is woven into the ideas of a number of the authors whose ideas have informed the text. Ortega claims provenance for some of Heidegger's ideas; Gadamer and Ricoeur both acknowledge their debt to Heidegger; Clarke's book is deliberately entitled *Being There*; and Harré acknowledges the more or less equivalence between Heidegger's thrown into a life-world and Wittgenstein's forms of life that provide the springboard for his analysis.

However, all understanding is mediated by action without which there are no happenings<sup>10</sup>. Agency, then, is a form of internal mediation in which the *self* or the understandings that ground reasons for action, is also the *self* at whom actions are ultimately directed. This circle of understanding preserves the identity or being of the *self* and can only be disturbed by actions that are not driven by self-understanding, the consciousness of the *self*, but by actions that are other-regulated. The sources of this other-regulation are either biological mechanisms that regulate the course and direction of action (and here space permits only a nod in the direction of Piaget's explication of the logic or psycho-logic of action); a *self* or consciousness that is *other*; or by the constraints and enabling conditions imposed by the otherness of a novel situation of which the mediatee is a constituent part. This conception of a situation as an occasion or inducement to action is different from the notion of a situation as a setting that is independent of the learner and into which the learner may step or be thrust. For example, Wertsch (1991:15) states that 'I use the term sociocultural because I want to understand how mental action is situated in cultural, historical, and institutional settings'. By posing the problem in this way, Wertsch seems to imply that mental actions and settings are separate or independent entities such that one can be situated in the other<sup>11</sup>. He argues that Vygotsky 'did little to spell out how specific historical, cultural, and institutional settings are tied to various forms of mediated action' and that by focusing 'on small group interaction, especially the interaction of the adult-child dyad' he failed to 'deal with broader sociocultural issues' (Wertsch 1991:46). Again, Wertsch's argument reflects the view that mediated action and broader sociocultural issues are separate entities that need to be tied together. The point that Wertsch seems to miss is that the adult-child dyad (teacher-learner) is precisely the place where culture, history, tradition, and the institutions of social life transform actions into the 'mediated actions'

<sup>10</sup> The tension in this dialectic of doings and happenings is captured in Dennett's (1993:418) account of a *narrative self* that is constituted by the stories we tell about who we are. 'Our tales are spun, but for the most part we don't spin them; they spin us. Our human consciousness, and our narrative selfhood, is their product; not their source'.

<sup>11</sup> In contrast, Clark (1997:7,33) refers to 'embodied and environmentally embedded agents—beings that move and act upon their world' such that 'Brain, body, world, and artifact are discovered locked together in the most complex of conspiracies'.



that constitute the broader sociocultural issues and settings. An alternative, if not opposite, interpretation of a sociocultural approach is that to the extent that culture, history, and institutions are settings at all, they are 'situated' in mental actions in the sense that they are constitutive of such actions.

The constraints that are inherent in a situation are revealed when a situation is transformed into a task whose solution requires the transformation of prior or pre-understanding into new understanding. To understand a situation is to understand how it works; and how it works is what we do when confronted with new and novel objects and events. What we do, or can do, is determined by the constraints and enablements imposed by the situation; the limits set by the horizons of the inner world (*Welt*) of our understanding and outer world (*Umwelt*) of objects and events. Both Ortega and Gadamer employ the concept of 'horizon' in relation to the understanding of a situation.

Environment, then, is the patent or semipatent world around us. But in addition to this, beyond our horizon and our environment the world at any particular moment contains a latent immensity made up of pure comprehences; an immensity that, in each situation of ours, is a hidden, eclipsed immensity, concealed by our environment and enveloping it .... Yet in this state of latency and eclipse, they act on our life as habituality .... The horizon is the dividing line between the part of the world that is patent and the part of it that is latent (Ortega 1957:67).

Understanding of the past, then, undoubtedly requires an historical horizon. But it is not the case that we acquire this horizon by placing ourselves within a historical situation. Rather, we must always already have a horizon in order to be able to place ourselves within a situation. For what do we mean by 'placing ourselves' in a situation? Certainly not just disregarding ourselves. This is necessary, of course, in that we must imagine the other situation. But into this other situation we must also bring ourselves. Only this fulfils the meaning of 'placing ourselves'. If we place ourselves in the position of someone else, for example, then we shall understand him, i.e. become aware of the otherness, the indissoluble individuality of the other person, by placing ourselves in his position (Gadamer 1975:271).

On the one hand, we are constrained by our prior conceptions or pre-understandings of and about the world. On the other hand, the objects and events we experience also place constraints on what can be done to and with them in terms of their properties. A scissor is constrained in the way it works. Unlike a knife, its blades are concealed and will only cut when the blades are exposed. But a pair of scissors can be used as a dagger or a punch, by a person for whom its cutting function is opaque. However, if its cutting function remains concealed to its user, then it is profoundly misunderstood; and to the extent that it is used as a dagger (in the absence of understanding its cutting function), this imposed pre-understanding prevents or inhibits the potential understanding that is inherent in the design of the tool; the aboutness that it designates in its working. In this sense, a scissor is ambiguous in its functional structure, its working or design.

Like all tools (including Vygotsky's symbolic tools that encompass speech and language in general), a scissor has the potential to expand or open up new horizons, to use Gadamer's (1975:269) metaphor or, in Ricoeur's (1983:182-193) terms, to reveal a new world; a world of cutting, of manufacture, of capital accumulation, and so on. But for this to happen, the scissor must pose a question and, thereby, present itself as a task whose functional structure or design<sup>12</sup>, requires to be understood. The design of a situation is revealed in the working of the structure in which the constraints (and enablements) of the inner and outer world together serve to regulate the actions that transform a situation or experience into a task. This intersection of the inner and outer worlds, or what Gadamer calls the *fusion of horizons*, constitutes the situation. For this to happen, the situation must pose a question or the experience produce a disjunction, in the sense that habitual ways of acting on and with the objects in question are obstructed. If a scissor is used as a stabbing instrument, the questions it poses are why two daggers should be joined together through a central pivot and why the handle should consist of two large protruding hollow discs that interfere with its effective use as a weapon. A task, then, requires the surrender of the pre-understandings that obstruct or inhibit those actions whose doing would serve to reveal the design

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<sup>12</sup> The distinction between structure and functional structure or design is captured by Bakhtin (1990:267) who distinguishes between *architectonics* or structure of the aesthetic object and its composition. 'The structure of a work, understood as a structure that actualizes the aesthetic object, we shall call the *composition* of a work'.

that lies concealed in the structure of the situation. In this sense, the demands of a task, the questions posed by a situation, are the counterpart of the constraints of a situation.

The difficulty with the concept of situation is that it does not stand still. A situation is the beginning and end of a task in the sense that the situation, like the horizon, moves with us as we engage in the task of understanding and persists until understanding is achieved. Because understanding signals the end of a task, the achievement of understanding is also the dissolution of the situation. A situation that does not pose a question or require a solution ceases to be a situation in the sense of an object of understanding. Tying our shoelaces is not a task that we engage in but an activity that is performed routinely without effort or thought. This is not the case for a young child for whom tying shoelaces is a complex task; a problem occasioned by shoes and their untied laces and a question whose answer is given by tied shoelaces. We experience a set of events as a task when there is a need to understand; when sense and reference become unstuck; when the inner and outer horizons of consciousness are dislocated and resist the harmonious coupling of horizons within which pre-understandings are contained. These prior understandings, or prejudices to use Gadamer's term, are what we carry with us, not as baggage that can be discarded, or lost and latter recovered, but as part of our being or selfhood. When understanding is achieved, even after a period of intense effort, it has a quality of being self-evident. New understanding does not change the set of objects or events that constitute a task, such as the configurations of blocks, beads, and water levels characteristic of Piagetian conservation tasks, but transforms the *self* by incorporating the situation into its being. Younger and older children understand the 'conservation' situation differently but in saying this we are saying that they are conscious of different situations. For the young child, the events are about different quantities of liquid whereas for the older child they are about the same amounts. In both cases, the relation between experience and situation is one of understanding and, in this sense, what distinguishes the children is their being. The element of difference in the two situations does not reside in the events of the external world but in the internal world that constitutes the consciousness of the children. Understanding is not a skill that improves with practice, or a bit of information that may be forgotten or added to a store of similar bits of information. The *self* that is transformed is not a bloated version of its former *self*. New understanding demands a negation and not an elaboration or refinement of previous understanding. This inner world

of understanding is the product of negating transformations of the *self* whose being is prior to any situation or task. If understanding is considered an incomplete work, then for any given situation, the *self* is in a potential relation of pre-understanding *vis-à-vis* new situations.

The task inherent in every situation that begs a question is to overcome pre-understandings that attach inappropriate questions to the answers that constitute the situation. That understanding is nourished by prior or pre-understanding is the foundation of the hermeneutic circle. The problem for any analysis of understanding, how it is possible and how it is achieved, is to penetrate the circle by finding a point of entry. Mediation as a form of other regulation is a means of penetrating the circle of understanding by furnishing the mediatee not with ready-made understanding but with alternative pre-understandings that facilitate rather than obstruct engagement with the task at hand. The 'otherness' that defines all mediation is not merely another person, analogous to an interlocutor in a dialogue, but a horizon or world view; a perspective of a world constituted by situations that are alien to the mediatee. To enter another world, that of the mediator, the mediatee must experience the situations that constitute the life of the mediator by addressing the questions whose answers constitute the situations that the mediatee encounters; situations whose 'otherness' is not the individual other person but the world(s) of the other.

Understanding is not to be thought of so much as an action of one's subjectivity, but as the placing of oneself within a process of tradition, in which past and present are constantly fused .... we do not try to recapture the author's attitude of mind but, if this is the terminology we are to use, we try to recapture the perspective within which he has formed his views (Gadamer 1975:258f).

From the perspective of the *self*, new understanding is experienced as a revelation, a happening that is brought about by actions whose source or generative power derives from a consciousness that is other. But the otherness of the consciousness that flows through mediation is not necessarily the intentionality that drives the actions of the other as mediator. The mediator's reasons for regulating or directing the actions of the mediatee, or the purpose of the mediator, is not the goal of understanding of the mediatee. As Ricoeur points out, understanding of a text does not, and should not, require an

understanding of the author's intentions behind a text but of a world that is revealed in front of the text.

Therefore what we want to understand is not something hidden behind the text, but something disclosed in front of it .... Understanding has less than ever to do with the author and his situation. It wants to grasp the proposed worlds opened up by the references of the text. To understand a text is to follow its movement from sense to reference, from what it says, to what it talks about (Ricoeur 1983:218).

To ask a question is already to impose understanding on a situation. We do not ask, cannot ask, questions about matters we do not understand. The task of education or understanding, in Vygotsky's (1978:89) sense of learning that runs ahead of development, is to trace the path that leads from answers *backwards* to questions. In this sense, we can distinguish between training and education. Training is a process of providing answers to questions whereas education requires that the actions of the mediatee or learner must reveal what the situation is about; the question to which the situation is an answer. In moving from answer to question, situations are transformed into tasks, the essential characteristic of which is the surrender of agency or submission to the design inherent in the situation. The task demands that the actor produce a performance, the happening of which is the revealing of the design, in which the actor plays a part, or as Gadamer (1975:95f) suggests in respect of play, in which the actor is played with or constrained to perform in ways prescribed by the situation of the game.

... all playing is a being played. The attraction of a game, the fascination it exerts, consists precisely in the fact that the game tends to master the players .... Whoever 'tries' is in fact the one who is tried. The real subject of the game ... is not the player, but instead the game itself. The game is what holds the player in its spell, draws him into play, and keeps him there.

The essential difference between the activities that constitute play and those of a task, is that play does not pose a question or culminate in the transformation of the consciousness of the *self*. In play, the situation of the game is re-created and the design of the game, it's playing, is an expression of being in which the *self* marks time.

Thus the child gives itself a task in playing with the ball, and such tasks are playful ones, because 'the purpose of the game is not really the solution of the task, but the ordering and shaping of the movement of the game itself' (Gadamer 1975:95f).

The situation of the game, or the experience of playing, is not negated by play as is the case of a task. Play is never accomplished in the way that the mastering of a task marks its termination. In play, becoming is suspended as creation is overtaken by re-creation. Unlike a task, whose resolution is its undoing, in play we return again and again to the game whose playfulness consists in the infinite variety of possible answers to the same question. 'The movement which is play has no goal which brings it to an end; rather it renews itself in constant repetition' (Gadamer 1975:93).

A task is not a serious kind of play and play is not a frivolous kind of task. To the extent that a game presents a situation that requires understanding, a potential player or novice will engage in the task of becoming a player. Once this is achieved, however, the actions required by the game are performed in the same repetitive and routine manner as any other actions. Whereas a task culminates in the negation of the experience of a situation, such that the situation is incorporated into the being of the *self*, in play, the *self* is drawn into the game, a situation whose design is the re-creation of experience with each playing of the game. Recreation, then, is a re-affirmation of the *self* in contrast to the transformation of the *self* that is achieved by the acquisition of new understanding. In engaging in a task, the performance that is enacted entails a negation of the pre-understanding that the learner brings to the task, such that the new understanding dislodges the old and to the extent that the new takes hold and is grasped, it serves to displace the old. To treat a situation as a game is to retain a degree of detachment from the situation by substituting for the task, routine actions that sustain the situation. To play the system, to name the game, to go through the motions, are all ways of maintaining the identity and being of the *self* as against engagement in a task whose realization is the negation of the *self* as a moment in its transformation from one state of being to another and in the transformation of the situation from subject to object of understanding.

Unlike the achievement of understanding, accomplishment in play depends on the improvement through practice of the routine actions that constitute the game. Clearly, in Piagetian terms, the achievement of conservation by concrete operational children cannot depend on the practice and perfection of non-conservation. It is in this sense that skills must be

distinguished from understanding. Whether we speak of the artisan, sportsperson, actor, or writer, it is not understanding that is made perfect by practice but actions whose performance not only depends on prior understandings but is generated by them. Horses and athletes can and are trained by trainers who cannot themselves achieve the level of skill they are attempting to improve in their trainees. In contrast, teaching becomes redundant when the teacher's level of understanding is matched by the student. This is why the best students outgrow their teachers or convert them to trainers who can coach them to improve their techniques but not their understanding. In this sense, the ends of education justify its means whereas the means of training justify its ends. Practice, in the sense of training, may strive for perfection but it is the antithesis of negation; a celebration of habit and stability in the face of innovation and transformation. The pleasure we derive from a game is that it presents a challenge to our skill, or *ego*, but not to our being or *self*; and the satisfaction we derive from improving our performance in play is self-satisfaction. The effort and energy that is expended on the activities in which we engage for relaxation, serve to affirm the *self* by entrenching its way of being.

It is part of play that the movement is not only without goal or purpose but also without effort. It happens, as it were, by itself. The ease of play, which naturally does not mean that there is any real absence of effort, but phenomenologically refers only to absence of strain, is experienced subjectively as relaxation. The structure of play absorbs the player into itself, and thus takes him from the burden of the initiative, which constitutes the actual strain of existence. This is also seen in the spontaneous tendency to repetition that emerges in the player and in the constant self-renewal of play, which influences its form (Gadamer 1975:94).

The excitement that surrounds sporting contents, the compulsion to pursue 'who-dun-it' stories, and the addiction induced by Soap Operas, lies in the suspense of the answer that is given at the end of the game, in the concluding chapter of the book, or the next episode in an infinite series of television banality. But no mystery attaches to the questions, all of which are given in advance by the genre of which they are an expression. Even when we do not participate as players we are drawn into the game as spectators. In this situation, of which we are a part, we may take delight in the skill of the players or be disappointed by their ineptitude. But in the event, the game, each time it is played, is a reaffirmation of the inner world of our being, of the way in which we understand the world and our place in that world. Entertainment

is essentially a situation in which our mode of participation is that of spectator. The spectacle that unfolds does not pose a problem or impose itself as a task. On the contrary, entertainment is predicated on prior understanding and dedicated to its preservation. This is why entertainment is often contrasted with education and, perhaps more significantly, why learning should not be confused, or confuse itself, with entertainment.

It is as spectators and not as players that we experience the world of art in all its expressive forms. This does not mean that as spectators we stand apart or detached from works of art. Every work of art is a potential situation, an open invitation, not only to participate in a world whose horizons are contained within the work, but to enliven that world. As a product of work, art is an answer the understanding of which does not lie in an explanation of its production but in the questions that its expressive power evokes. Whereas games are performed primarily for the player, art is performed primarily for the spectator. Gymnasts perform for themselves as do dancers at a party, unlike ballet dancers whose performances are directed at an audience. In this sense, it is the spectators who play or are played with by the artistic performance. For the performers, the performance is work as is the creation of the artistic work whose destiny is to find expression in performance. Artistic expression is part task part play embodying both creation and re-creation. In its re-creative aspect, art most resembles play when viewed from the perspective of the spectator or audience. It is also in its re-creation that art endures and lives as part of tradition and it is this power of endurance that we attribute to great works of art. But what is being done or happening when we attend performances of classic works with which we are thoroughly familiar? Wherein lies the excitement and pleasure in experiencing again and again a Beethoven symphony, a production of Hamlet, a Van Gogh landscape?

Every performance has a festive air and is a celebration that culminates in applause, itself an expression of joy and appreciation. Clearly, the audience's applause is most directly addressed to the performers' skill. But in applauding the performers we celebrate more than the performance. Artistic works are not re-produced in their performance but re-created and we celebrate their creation in our applause. But in applauding the work and genius of its creator, we again reaffirm the tradition of which it is a part and which is part of us and, in so doing, set the stage for its next performance. But the act of creation that we celebrate with each performance of a work of art, in contrast to the act of production, is not the playing of a game. It is the transformation of our being that occurs when understanding shifts the horizon



of our inner world. In its creative aspect, art shows itself as an enchanted task that playfully teases our understanding, enticing the *self* to surrender to its charm. Once understood, our aesthetic experience cannot be undone or set aside and a special effort, that requires understanding, is needed to appreciate unfamiliar forms of artistic expression in the same spontaneous, self-evident, and intuitive way that we are drawn to the familiar. Aesthetic intuition is the expression of a tradition of art that culminates in the consciousness that confronts new forms of art as pre-understanding.

In the same way that the truth or meaning of a scissor is revealed in its design, an artistic work reveals its meaning in its performance which is an expression of a truth that endures and is perpetuated with each performance. But the truth or meaning of a work that is realized in performance, does not reside in the work as a part, aspect, or attribute of its constitution. Truth and meaning are properties of consciousness, attributes of understanding that ground the inner world of the *self*. Understanding is the stuff of consciousness, or to use the more dynamic idiom of James, consciousness is the stream through which understanding flows and constitutes the inner world of our being; a world that lives in us as distinct from the world in which we live. To be in that world is an answer; not to be is the question.

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