

8 The Place where we Live¹

I wish to examine the place, using the word in an abstract sense, where we most of the time are when we are experiencing life.

By the language we use we show our natural interest in this matter. I may be *in* a muddle, and then I either crawl out of the muddle or else try to put things in order so that I may, at least for a time, know *where I am*. Or I may feel I am *at sea*, and I take bearings so that I may come to port (any port in a storm), and then when I am on dry land I look for a house built *on rock* rather than on sand; and *in* my own home, which (as I am English) is my castle, I am *in* a seventh heaven.

Without straining the language of everyday use I may talk of my behaviour in the world of external (or shared) reality, or I may be having an inner or mystical experience, while squatting on the ground contemplating my navel.

It is perhaps a rather modern use of the word inner, to use it to refer to psychic reality, to claim that there is an inside where personal wealth builds up (or poverty shows) as we make progress in emotional growth and personality establishment.

Here are two places, then, the inside and the outside of the individual. But is this all?

When considering the lives of human beings there are those who like to think superficially in terms of behaviour, and in terms of conditioned reflexes and conditioning; this leads to what is called behaviour therapy. But most of us get tired of restricting ourselves to behaviour or to the observable extrovert life of persons who, whether they like it or not, are motivated from the unconscious. By contrast, there are those who place emphasis on the 'inner' life, who think that the effects of economics and even of starvation itself have but little importance as compared with mystical experience. Infinity for those in the latter category is at

¹ This is a restatement of the theme of the previous chapter, written for another, and different, audience.

the centre of the self, whereas for the behaviourists who think in terms of external reality infinity is reaching out beyond the moon to the stars and to the beginning and the end of time, time that has neither an end nor a beginning.

I am attempting to get in between these two extremes. If we look at our lives we shall probably find that we spend most of our time neither in behaviour nor in contemplation, but somewhere else. I ask: where? And I try to suggest an answer.

AN INTERMEDIATE ZONE

In psychoanalytic writings and in the vast literature that has been influenced by Freud there can be found a tendency to dwell *either* on a person's life as it relates to objects *or else* on the inner life of the individual. In the life of the person who is object-relating it is assumed that there is postulated a state of tension driving towards instinct-satisfaction, or else a basking in the leisure of gratification. A complete statement would include the concept of displacement and all the mechanisms of sublimation. Where excitement has not led to satisfaction the person is caught up in the discomforts that frustration generates, discomforts that include bodily dysfunction and a sense of guilt or the relief that comes from the discovery of a scapegoat or a persecutor.

In regard to mystical experiences, in the literature of psychoanalysis the person we are looking at is asleep dreaming, or if awake is going through a process rather akin to dream-work, but doing this while awake. Every mood is there and the unconscious fantasy of the mood ranges from idealization on the one hand to the awfulness of the destruction of all that is good on the other – bringing the extremes of elation or despair, wellbeing in the body or a sense of being diseased and an urge to suicide.

This is a much simplified and indeed distorted quick review of a vast literature, but I am not attempting to make a comprehensive statement so much as to point out that the written words of psychoanalytic literature do not seem to tell us all that we want to know. What, for instance, are we doing when we are listening to a Beethoven symphony or making a pilgrimage to a picture gallery or reading *Troilus and Cressida* in bed, or playing tennis? What is a child doing when sitting on the floor playing with toys under the aegis of the mother? What is a group of teenagers doing participating in a pop session?

It is not only: what are we doing? The question also needs to be posed: where are we (if anywhere at all)? We have used the concepts

of inner and outer, and we want a third concept. Where are we when we are doing what in fact we do a great deal of our time, namely, enjoying ourselves? Does the concept of sublimation really cover the whole pattern? Can we gain some advantage from an examination of this matter of the possible existence of a place for living that is not properly described by either of the terms 'inner' and 'outer'?

Lionel Trilling (1955) in his Freud Anniversary Lecture says:

'For [Freud] there is an honorific accent in the use of the word [culture], but at the same time, as we cannot fail to hear, there is in what he says about culture an unflinching note of exasperation and resistance. Freud's relation to culture must be described as an ambivalent one.'

I think that in this lecture Trilling is concerned with the same inadequacy that I refer to here, although very different language is being employed.

It will be observed that I am looking at the highly sophisticated adult's enjoyment of living or of beauty or of abstract human contrivance, and at the same time at the creative gesture of a baby who reaches out for the mother's mouth and feels her teeth, and at the same time looks into her eyes, seeing her creatively. For me, playing leads on naturally to cultural experience and indeed forms its foundation.

Now, if my argument has cogency, we have three instead of two human states to compare with each other. When we look at these three sets of the human state we can see that there is one special feature that distinguishes what I am calling cultural experience (or playing) from the other two.

Looking first at external reality and the individual's contact with external reality in terms of object-relating and object-usage, one sees that external reality itself is fixed; moreover, the instinctual endowment that provides the backing for object-relating and object-use is itself fixed for the individual, though it varies according to phase and age, and the individual's freedom to make use of instinctual drives. Here we are more free or less free according to the laws that have been formulated in considerable detail in the psychoanalytic literature.

Let us look next at inner psychic reality, the personal property of each individual in so far as a degree of mature integration has been reached which includes the establishment of a unit self, with the implied existence of an inside and an outside, and a limiting membrane. Here again there is to be seen a fixity that belongs to inheritance, to the personality organization, and to environmental factors introjected and to personal factors projected.

By contrast with these, I suggest that the area available for manoeuvre in terms of the third way of living (where there is cultural experience or creative playing) is extremely variable as between individuals. This is because this third area is a product of the *experiences of the individual person* (baby, child, adolescent, adult) in the environment that obtains. There is a kind of variability here that is different in quality from the variabilities that belong to the phenomenon of inner personal psychic reality and to external or shared reality. The extent of this third area can be minimal or maximal, according to the summation of actual experiences.

It is this special kind of variability that concerns me here and now and I wish to examine its meaning. I am making this examination in terms of the position, relative to the individual in the world, in which cultural experience (play) can be said to 'take place'.

A POTENTIAL SPACE

I put forward for discussion of its value as an idea the thesis that for creative playing and for cultural experience, including its most sophisticated developments, the position is *the potential space* between the baby and the mother. I refer to the hypothetical area that exists (but cannot exist) between the baby and the object (mother or part of mother) during the phase of the repudiation of the object as not-me, that is, at the end of being merged in with the object.

From a state of being merged in with the mother the baby is at a stage of separating out the mother from the self, and the mother is lowering the degree of her adaptation to the baby's needs (both because of her own recovery from a high degree of identification with her baby and because of her perception of the baby's new need, the need for her to be a separate phenomenon.¹

This is exactly the same as the danger area that is arrived at sooner or later in all psychiatric treatments, the patient having felt secure and viable because of the analyst's reliability, adaptation to need, and willingness to become involved, and now beginning to feel a need to shake free and to achieve autonomy. Like the baby with the mother, the patient cannot become autonomous except in conjunction with the therapist's readiness to let go, and yet any move on the part of the therapist away from a state of being merged in with the patient is under dire suspicion, so that disaster threatens.

¹ I have discussed this thesis at length in my paper 'Primary Maternal Preoccupation' (1956).

It will be remembered that in the example I gave of a boy's use of string (Chapter 1) I referred to two objects as being both *joined and separated* by the string. This is the paradox that I accept and do not attempt to resolve. The baby's separating-out of the world of objects from the self is achieved only through the absence of a space between, the *potential* space being filled in in the way that I am describing.

It could be said that with human beings there can be no separation, only a threat of separation; and the threat is maximally or minimally traumatic according to the experience of the first separations.

How, one may ask, does separation of subject and object, of baby and mother, seem in fact to happen, and to happen with profit to all concerned, and in the vast majority of cases? And this in spite of the impossibility of separation? (The paradox must be tolerated.)

The answer can be that in the baby's *experience* of life, actually in relation to the mother or mother-figure, there usually develops a degree of confidence in the mother's reliability; or (in another language belonging to psychotherapy) the patient begins to sense that the therapist's concern arises not out of a need for a dependant, but out of a capacity in the therapist to identify with the patient out of a feeling 'if I were in your shoes . . .'. In other words, the mother's or therapist's love does not only mean meeting dependency needs, but it comes to mean affording the opportunity for this baby or this patient to move from dependence to autonomy.

A baby can be *fed* without love, but loveless or impersonal *management* cannot succeed in producing a new autonomous human child. Here where there is trust and reliability is a potential space, one that can become an infinite area of separation, which the baby, child, adolescent, adult may creatively fill with playing, which in time becomes the enjoyment of the cultural heritage.

The special feature of this place where play and cultural experience have a position is that *it depends for its existence on living experiences*, not on inherited tendencies. One baby is given sensitive management here where the mother is separating out from the baby so that the area for play is immense; and the next baby has so poor an experience at this phase of his or her development that there is but little opportunity for development except in terms of introversion or extroversion. The potential space, in the latter case, has no significance, because there was never a built-up sense of trust matched with reliability, and therefore there was no relaxed self-realization.

In the experience of the more fortunate baby (and small child and adolescent and adult) the question of separation in separating does not

arise, because in the potential space between the baby and the mother there appears the creative playing that arises naturally out of the relaxed state; it is here that there develops a use of symbols that stand at one and the same time for external world phenomena and for phenomena of the individual person who is being looked at.

The other two areas do not lose significance because of this that I am putting forward as a third area. If we are truly examining human beings, then we must be expected to make observations that can be superimposed, the one on the other. Individuals do relate to the world in ways that involve them in instinctual gratification, either direct or in sublimated forms. Also, we do know the paramount importance of sleep and the deep dreaming that is at the core of the personality, and of contemplation and of relaxed undirected mental inconsequence. Nevertheless, playing and cultural experience are things that we do value in a special way; these link the past, the present, and the future; *they take up time and space*. They demand and get our concentrated deliberate attention, deliberate but without too much of the deliberateness of trying.

The mother adapts to the needs of her baby and of her child who is gradually evolving in personality and character, and this adaptation gives her a measure of reliability. The baby's experience of this reliability over a period of time gives rise in the baby and growing child to a feeling of confidence. The baby's confidence in the mother's reliability, and therefore in that of other people and things, makes possible a separating-out of the not-me from the me. At the same time, however, it can be said that separation is avoided by the filling in of the potential space with creative playing, with the use of symbols, and with all that eventually adds up to a cultural life.

There is in many a failure in confidence which cramps the person's play-capacity because of the limitations of the potential space; likewise there is for many a poverty of play and cultural life because, although the person had a place for erudition, there was a relative failure on the part of those who constitute the child's world of persons to introduce cultural elements at the appropriate phases of the person's personality development. Naturally, limitations arise out of the relative lack of cultural erudition or even the lack of acquaintance with the cultural heritage which may characterize those actually in charge of a child.

The first need, then, in respect of this that is described in this chapter, is for protection of the baby-mother and baby-parent relationship at the early stage of every boy or girl child's development, so that there may come into being the potential space in which, because of trust, the child may creatively play.