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Loops and Fakes and Illusions

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- Respond To This Article

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1Playing in childhood we are presented with foundational puzzles. Many of these arise directly from our negotiations with the laws of physics; others arise from the deliberate activities of our elders, teachers and siblings. As we sit on our grandmotherâ€™s knee we are presented with a range of playful and deceptive games. Something as simple as a loop of wool can initiate this play: now it is a straight thread; now it is a loop. Something as simple as the opening hand is the potential source of a problem that may stay with us for a lifetime: now it is a hand with open palm; now it is a fist that hides. Something as simple as a dropped toy ball can initiate the motive to engage with the world as a problem: now it is here, at hand; now it is gone, down there and rolling away. While each of these events is real, the space and time of such play can be described as an illusion. The figure of this illusion is itself a loop within which a special kind of logic pertains. This logic is illustrated in D. W. Winnicottâ€™s concept of illusory experience and in John Deweyâ€™s concept of perplexity as the source of human thinking. As illusions, loops are puzzling; as real objects and events, loops pre-figure and offer to mediate the development of our understanding of our being in the world.

2 Donald Woods Winnicott (1896-1971) a British child psychoanalyst, spent much of his time exploring the relationships that children form with objects. His work offers accounts of an extraordinary array of everyday engagements that children have with simple things such as their own toes and bits of string. A key aspect of Winnicottâ€™s theories of the formative years is the sustaining of a loop, or in Winnicottâ€™s terms, "an intermediate state" between the child and reality.

3I am here staking a claim for an intermediate state between a babyâ€™s inability and his growing ability to recognize and accept reality. I am therefore studying the substance of illusion, that which is allowed to the infant, and which in adult life is inherent in art and religion, and yet becomes the hallmark of madness when an adult puts too powerful a claim on the credulity of others, forcing them to acknowledge a sharing

of illusion that is not their own. We can share a respect for illusory experience, and if we wish we may collect together and form a group on the basis of the similarity of our illusory experiences. This is a natural root of grouping among human beings. (Winnicott 3)

4Social groups establish preferred forms to account for dynamic systems in everyday life. The hand, for example, might be generally agreed to be an open hand, at rest, which means that fingers are curved towards the palm and the palm is down. The number of variations in the way in which a hand might be found, and described, is so large as to be able to symbolise an entire language. From the outside, to a non-signer, it is an illusion that hand-signing is language, just as it is an illusion that spoken and written languages are languages to those who do not share the particular language illusion. Within the range of possible hand gestures, a loop or tension-of-illusion is established: those in the loop can comprehend the signing as language; those outside the loop can only pretend that the illusion works. Recalling that the word "illusion" takes its origin in the Latin for play ("ludere") it comes as no surprise that initiation games frequently use spurious loop activities to trap the outsider in ways that will embarrass the new-comer. The sense of mockery in the word "illusion" is made evident as the new-comer has no way of determining the validity of the pretend inside information. Suggestions that they drink some foul concoction can only be answered by drinking the concoction: there is no way from the outside of the illusion group to resolve the challenge. To enter the inside of the loop, the new-comer has to cross some kind of line in a way that leaves a mark: the affect of embarrassment is often enough.

5Our ability to suspend disbelief and sustain the illusion as loop is a fundamental requirement of our social being and of our cognitive development. "Once upon a time" is a call to step inside the loop of fiction where things may emerge that cannot otherwise emerge. While this loop may be seen as nothing more than an inner fantasy world, it is impossible to sustain this concept unless we deny the common reality of such a world. The world of the loop is not some kind of denial of an outer reality, nor is it an assertion of an inner freedom that can remain separate to an external reality. We may claim to make words mean whatever we wish them to mean in an inner and private dimension, but in making such a claim we must use a common meaning of "meaning" and we must use the syntax and grammar of a language. Much as we might wish for such an interiority, Winnicott requires us to recognise the further need for an "intermediate area of experience". This intermediate area is the public space of shared illusion:

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> It is an area that is not challenged, because no claim is made on its behalf except that it shall exist as a resting-place for the individual engaged in the perpetual human task of keeping inner and outer reality separate yet interrelated. (Winnicott 2)

7In this intermediate area, it is possible to sustain illusions only in relation to a presumed other reality. That is, the logics of illusion are logics that apply, if differently, in the outer and inner realms of experience. The reality of a loop may seem soft. Loops are readily formed without substantial alteration of the loop forming material. Loops are also frightening in their potential operation as capturing devices. The forces they can activate are deadly.

8As dynamic objects, loops offer their own interpretation of Winnicottâ€™s concept of illusion. At some point the game or play of illusions terminates in a disclosure of closure that instructs the play. The closed hand that hides the marble opens to reveal the marble. One moment in the play of logics is elected or given a priority. The relative stability of this pattern is made obvious in certain forms of illusion that take illusions as their "fixed" shape. Knitting, for example, consists of loops interlocked with loops. As anyone who has pulled knitting apart knows, interlocking is fundamentally an illusion in its making and a disillusion in its pulling apart. Knitting can then be seen, in this sense to be "fake".

Fakes

9"Fake" does not mean "false" except that we have come to see the dressing up of things as being insubstantial and therefore not warranting attention. Worse, we see "fake" as being morally repugnant in that a fake thing takes the place of a real thing. But "fake" also means "a coil of rope". In this case, the fake is substantial while ever it exists. Thus, a fake is a kind of benevolent illusion. The shape that the coil of rope makes is no less real, in time, than the ship-deck on which it is formed. When it is uncoiled, the rope takes on its "true" or active shape. Should the uncoiled rope form a loop, this loop is potentially malevolent. It may take the leg of a sailor. In childhood, this game is played out using simple loops and slip knots that hold but let go when pulled.

10 The dynamic forms are sometimes the illusion; sometimes it is the static form that is the illusion. That is, the pragmatic interpretation allows for the display of the fake as a cognitive toy. Any state of the dynamic form may take priority at any one time for the purposes of the use of the system. When we sit down, our height differences are reduced: this fake is a crucial part of our social world.

Loops

11Winnicott lets us see the life-long significance of the looping and faking that we daily use to sustain our dynamic worlds . In our loop worlds we establish a space "between thumb and the teddy bear, between the oral erotism and the true object-relationship" (Winnicott 2). Within the loop, the status of objects and systems is open to transformation, just as, over time, in the material world, objects and systems are transformed. The valency of any object or system, viewed from within the loop, is fundamentally indeterminate and hence open. It is within this loop-logic that we can understand the ironic singing of songs whose content is radically alternative to the situation of the singing: children can be heard singing songs filled with sexual connotations without there being any awareness of the inappropriate content; many people can hear and sing along with Bette Midlerâ€™s rendition of "God is watching us" without the irony striking home that God is doing this from a distance of total indifference. The tongue in Betteâ€™s cheek could not get any bigger, but from within the loop, the song can have any value the singer selects. While we may sustain fantasy worlds as intermediate worlds, Winnicott makes obvious that "the motherâ€™s main task (next to providing opportunity for illusion) is disillusionment" (Winnicott 12). At some point the disjunction between illusion and reality becomes perplexing. The ball that the child drops does evade the childâ€™s grasp. It is not simply a matter of sustaining the mood. Either the ball can be recovered or else it cannot.

Perplexity and the Dialectic of Loss

12John Dewey (1859-1952) is a major figure in American pragmatist schools of philosophy and in educational philosophy, especially problem-based theories of learning. His work bridges the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and covers all the major social and cultural issues of his day. As a thorough thinker, Dewey offers to provide explanations for most aspects of what is practically required of us in our living socially responsible lives. Even our "negative" affects, such as perplexity, are presented by Dewey as indicators of our practical connection with reality.

13 For Dewey, perplexity is a key feature of the state of mind that initiates the growth of the individual through engagement with the problematics of the world in which they live. Dewey points out that "thinking begins as soon as the baby who has lost the ball that he is playing with begins to foresee the possibility of something not yet existingâ€”its recovery" (How We Think 89). Losing the ball creates a difficulty, seeing that the ball might be recovered, the child is then able to move to resolve the difficulty, through action, in the real world. In this simple form we can determine the process of thesis (loss), anti-thesis (promise of recovery or remedy), synthesis (resolution of the problem with an enhanced understanding of the process). The theological allusions should not be discounted in this model. Nor should we forget Winnicottâ€™s caution here "that the task of reality-acceptance is never completed". The ball game is still a game that retains the general forgiveness of the loop in that the real loss is mitigated by the surrounding and support "illusion" that the parent will recover the ball for the child. It may be socially frowned on, but adults still drop things just to instigate the "illusion" that others will recover their loss (for an extended account of Deweyâ€™s notion of perplexity, see Russell).

14Still, the loss of the ball is a problem that holds very real interest for the baby and therefore the problem is perplexing. According to Dewey: "Interest marks the annihilation of the distance between the person and the materials and results of his action; it is the sign of their organic union" (Middle Works 160). Being "entirely taken up with" (p. 160) the loss of the ball, the baby experiences the situation in what McLuhan describes as "depth". In the depth approach attention is able to shift from content to attention itself: "Consciousness itself is an inclusive process not at all dependent on content. Consciousness does not postulate consciousness in particular" (McLuhan 247).

Conclusion

15The capacity of consciousness to take an interest, in Deweyâ€™s terms, is the same capacity that consciousness displays in the sustaining of the loop of illusion. For Dewey, "interest marks the annihilation of the distance between the person and the materials and results of his action". This annihilation, in

Winnicottâ€™s gentler terms, is more of respite in the long journey. For Winnicott "no human being is free from the strain of relating inner and outer reality". The intermediary illusions remain illusions even if they are instructive. For Dewey, the focus on perplexity allows that the strain is integrated in an affect-complex that both sustains the illusion ("I can get the ball back") in the manner of a hypothesis ("I had the ball, I lost the ballâ€”losing the ball was a process, regaining the ball could also be a processâ€”I can have the ball again"). Granted, Dewey, as a pragmatist, starts with a real world process. Nonetheless, his approach points to the deeper connections between consciousness itself and the operations of the psychological development of the individual. From the perspective of perplexity, the puzzles of childhood are also the puzzles of the adult. As adults we continue to play with loops of all kinds. We maintain intermediary spaces and we conspire in the social illusions of language

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