Existential Child Therapy

The Child Meets the World

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The question “What is man?” has gained new urgency and momentum. Out of the multitudinous aspects of human life, certain essential features have been singled out to represent human existence. Definitions of man in terms of the instincts, will, and rationality no longer satisfy the quest of man for a comprehensive grasp of his essential nature and the meaning of his existence.

We now know that we can understand man as an integrated being only through knowledge which comes from a study of man in his world. We can appreciate man as an individual only by recognizing that man is and has his being in relation to the world.

The newborn infant enters the world as a particular and unique individual. The predisposing conditions for growing as an individual and for relating are both present from the very beginning, sometimes running parallel, sometimes fusing with each other. From the start, the infant is drawn toward making connections in the world, toward making contact with people, places, and things. He uses his body and all his senses to meet the world. He uses his voice and gestures to make his wants known. He contributes to life not only by bringing satisfaction and delight to those who hold and nourish

him, but also by bringing a unique and distinctive being into the world, a being that never before existed.

Outside his domain, the world is a vast and chaotic space. It is purely external territory to him. Yet it *is* the *Mitwelt,* the world we all share, and the desire quickens in him to take his place in the communal domain and be a part of this world. His first grasp of objects in the world diminishes the vastness of space for him. Although the infant cannot distinguish the form from the movement of objects, this very fusion helps to bring order to the chaos. As he actively participates in this *Mitwelt,* he transforms the space into a socialized universe where he can breathe and expand beyond the confines of his physiological smallness. Subjective participation in the world at once establishes a structure and a center of his existence as a self and at the same time contributes to a growing sense of relatedness.

People and objects serve as a means of orientation in the world, enabling a young child to place himself, to find his own position, and begin to establish a distinctive identity. In this effort, there is both relating and separating, reaching out and returning.

The child's vehicles for expanding into the world, besides his senses, are his voice, his thoughts, his feelings, and his fantasies. From the other direction, the sociocultural order exerts a drawing-out power, inviting the

child to come join in the living that surrounds him. Even as the world with its people and objects and conditions wields great influence upon the child, he makes his own impact on the world as a new and vital force. Thus the child assumes his place in the world and becomes part of the world. It is a two-way process, a two-way experience whereby the young child begins to bring order and unity and wholeness into what is initially a diffuse, chaotic universe. He begins to put down roots, to create a home for himself. While he is developing a unique self-hood within the reality of the world, the young child is sustained by a mediating, subjective reality. The mediation is based on sensory perception and maintained by intelligence and memory. These dimensions of the self, combined with imagination, are integrated into experience and contribute to the child's sense of substance and consistency.

The child experiences himself as the center of his own world. He harbors feelings of sureness, presence, and being, which are sometimes mistaken by adults for egocentricity and omnipotence. The focus of the growing child, however, is centeredness and connectedness—not selfishness and manipulation. Aside from extremely disturbed states, the self of the young child is never so completely isolated or removed that it is cut off from the bloodstream flowing to and from the self toward others. Subjectively, the child does not represent himself as disconnected from others. Individual and social, inner and outer, subject and object, world and child —all merge into one unified integrated being.

Growing into the societal world calls for the acceptance of all the social institutions and organizations that lay down the laws of conduct by which we all are bound. The world of institutions differs, however, from the historical-cultural world, where traditional goals and values prevail. They have an order of their own and are independent of the agents that have established and transmitted them. Hence as the child grows older, he faces not only the requirement that he make good in this *Mitwelt,* but also the problem of defining for himself what is good.

At this time, the child often does not value anything for itself but only for its effect on others. He finds that both the definition and evaluation of himself depend on the company he keeps. The world is a communal domain of self and others in which the child tries to be what he ought to be, as "ought" and "should" are defined for him by his parents and the other significant adults in the world.

Self-hood, however, is never totally taken up with the roles assigned by society. The child establishes and maintains his own identity, makes his own impact on his immediate world, and at the same time he accepts certain functions and roles. He learns to appreciate the rights of others. He respects others, but he does not abandon his own position.

To distinguish "Being" from the specific individual being, we must

perform a dialectic division, thereby achieving a fictitious cleavage between the self and the world. As he grows in self-hood and identity, the young child perceives, explores, and tests objects. He gauges the distance from himself to objects and people. He grasps them through his intellect as well as his sense of space and then incorporates them into his body of experience; he engages in transition and moves to new levels of Being. Such newly entered territories are full of tentativeness, ambivalence, and vacillation.

The child, being himself, is continually enhanced by becoming himself. This entails transforming passive and formless perceptions into active and expressive ones. The child is not merely a coordinator of sensations, as an electronic computer is a coordinator of impulses. Perceiving with his senses, he moves into space with them. He experiences reality in a new way, expanding into space and making the world his scene of action. He moves, stands, crawls, and walks. Each of these events carries him into a larger space and puts him into contact with new aspects of the world. By standing, by rising to the peculiarly human posture, as Straus says,[1] the child opposes the force of gravity. He comes face to face with others. He stands before and he stands against—thus distinguishing himself from all others.

Even before he can walk, the young child finds and feels himself as a body in space. He thrusts himself into the world with his senses—exploring, scouting, holding, seeking, and finding ways to make reality his own. As he

expands into space, moving into it and taking it in with his senses, experiencing again and again, he gains an appreciation of both his separateness and his relatedness. Gradually, he learns that the world is a true dwelling place, a space in which he can live comfortably. He is a born explorer, growing in a continuum of experience. His first voyage of discovery is his own body. Through a process of testing and savoring, he gains a sense of connectedness with his body. "This little piggy went to market," is the familiar refrain of a game in which the child's fingers and toes are affectionately touched and designated one by one, giving the child not only a sense of connectedness with his body, but also of relatedness with the person who is playing with him.

Soon the child gains a sense of body image consisting of an outline in space and the full occupation of this space. The sense of having a body and being a body develops not only through physical exploration, through grasping and touching, but also through mental vision and gazing upon one's own body. Merleau-Ponty[2] says that vision is a vital experience in this development:

> Vision is an act of two facets. To look at an object is to inhabit it, and from this habitation to grasp all things in terms of the aspect which they present to it. . . . But insofar as I see those things, too, they remain abodes open to my gaze, and, being potentially lodged in them, I already perceive from various angles the central object of my present vision.

Body image is a composite of an individual's corporeal existence and the expression of his right to take his place in the world. It is molded by his own views and attitudes and related to his prevailing preferences. Mental and muscular activities pursued with speed or sluggishness are decisive. Success or failure in establishing a social position finds its counterpart in the shape and volume of the individual's body image.

Goldstein[3] stresses the relation of a person's movement to his background. He says that for the normal person movement has a background. Every movement with its background has moments of a unique totality. The body and its shadow belong together, as the hand of a sundial belongs to the sun, as a touch belongs to the skin. Tactile and visual experiences are integrated in such a way that it is impossible to gauge the contribution of each sense. In the infant and young child, there is a simultaneous fusion of several processes—motor, sensory, and cognitive. Separation and integration go hand in hand, alternate, or occur simultaneously.

The physical and conceptual vicissitudes of the child's experience of his body are spiced by all the physical pleasures and aches that remain his exclusively and are not transferable. Impressions that are not incorporated into a body of experience and knowledge are out of the frame of the world shared with others. These impressions are uncommunicable, inexplicable, and beyond comprehension—autistic.

The young child relates to the world by his senses. In his own mind, while he copies the gestures of a sensible object, he imagines and creates something that is still the object of his sense, but no longer outside. The object comes to him, but its image becomes him. “All impression,” says Proust[4] “is double—half developed in the object and half produced in ourselves.” There is no transition between the instant in which the child sees an object and that in which he grasps its details, yet there is a moment of sensation and a moment of imagination. In every instant of time, each perception is related to the previous ones, each sound related to the result—leading to a total discovery. Sensory perception lays the foundation for meaningful experience. Touch and taste coincide in such a way that the subjective and objective aspects of an object mingle. The inherent quality of a percept and the child’s curious investigation merge into a single experience.

A child can become what he envisions himself to be. Image helps to transform desire into reality. Although desire can change objects and influence the turn of events away from their natural sequence and consequence, in the growing child there is a balance between normative, adaptive tendencies that aim at sustaining life and creative acts that promote life. To see, to hear, to see clearly, to hear distinctly, to savor what one is seeing or hearing moment by moment —such concrete motifs dominate the relation with the environment. Through repetition, continuity, and concentration, a demarcation is made of one object from another, of one

person from another in geometric and lived-in space. The identity of the I, the individual person, also grows out of this demarcation. The time element involved is the "Now" of the present, the outstanding definiteness out of all infinity. The overwhelming multitude of possibilities and diversities tears at the focus of the child. But he must choose. Being as experience has no limits, only points of contact. For the sense of totality, unity, and completion, the child himself has to set the limits.

Gradually, the child learns to distinguish among phenomena, between the animate and the inanimate, between animals and people, and between persons. The stuffed dog does not jump away when the little child shouts at it, but the live puppy may. When the child calls to his mother, her voice responds in a way that resembles his own calling to her more than the puppy's bark does. Papa sounds different from mama; sister and brother make still other kinds of sound. The child discovers not only the particular presence of others but also the differences between them and the possibility of relating himself to all of them, however different they may be.

The child also develops a sense of the continued existence of persons and objects even when they are out of his sight. Nearly everyone has played peek-a-boo with a child at one time or another. There is a significance in this activity beyond the fun of the game. By moving so as to shut out experience and admit it again, the child gains a new sense of stability and movement. He

acquires a sense of himself as separate from the world and an awareness of what is not before him at the moment. He distinguishes what is in view from what is recalled. The child remembers the person or object, and their reappearance validates his memory, giving him a concrete experience of continuity. Thus the child discovers that he can move out into time as well as space.

The infant and the very young child perceive only present time. To them Now is always. From this comes the child's experience of bliss. It is a unique feeling of wonder and delight. The child can know bliss, can have entire and untroubled pleasure in being Now—the moment which is complete and without limit. Unaware of past time or time to come, unrestricted by the one and not made anxious by the threat or promise of the other, the child is afloat, borne along on the ocean of time present. The experience of existence in a state where time is unlimited is of such a quality that the adult maintains his nostalgia for it all his life.

The time continuum, extending into space, is a promising source of endless possibilities. The child's first ventures into this continuum are indelibly fixed upon him, either with the enchantment of a marvelous discovery or the foreboding of a dangerous encounter. For each event, there is a different time sense. The inner structure of time is subject to many changes, but the one feature of order and continuity prevails. Days filled with active

experience, with no waste, quicken the tempo and rhythm of life. Fully experienced time rolls along steadily.

The young child often has an insatiable desire to prolong experience, to prolong time, to continue what he is doing at the moment no matter how urgent the adult calls or his own bodily needs. He is so totally involved in his present world that he cannot bear to break off making mud pies or arranging a doll's carriage or shouting and racing up and down as he plays at being an airplane pilot.

Experienced time has been contrasted with measured objectified time in that it is subjectively unique and varied in its tempo and rhythm. Temporality suffers a decisive change in the solipsistic world of a sick child. Time does not flow but is impaled on the past and becomes inextricable. It has a special hold on the frightened child. He tries desperately to get acquainted with his time in order to be able to discard past events. Only then does he feel he can dare to move on to new experience.

The child adds a third dimension to his time through role playing. He begins to grasp the future, to experience not merely what is absent but what is yet to come. He puts himself in touch with some of the possibilities for his own growth: he transcends the present and envisions the future. The child is able to leave off the socially assigned role of girl or boy for a moment and play

a chosen adult role, thus bringing the future into the total present of childhood. By pretending to live in that future, each child develops a concept of time to come, of growth out of the constriction of his current experience. Each child begins and pursues the creating of his own time.

Through role playing the child enlarges his experience. Roles are often played unwittingly. Some roles are *assigned* by society, such as the role of boy or of pupil. Others are *assumed* in playfulness and out of determination. Children play school for the sake of facilitating coexistence, to manifest concerted efforts. But they also take on roles in order to grow in their uniqueness, to grow up to the call of duty, to show that they can be responsible.

In Rainer Maria Rilke's *Stories of God*,[5] one tale tells how the thimble came to be God. Deciding that anything could be God, the children chose a shiny thimble which each child in turn was to carry for one day a week. On the whole, the arrangement worked out quite well. Everyone could see at once who had God, for that particular child walked about more stiffly and solemnly and wore a Sunday face. And though the thimble had not changed a whit, under the influence of its great dignity, the very thimbleness of it seemed a modest cloak hiding its real form.

Of all the vehicles for participation in the world, sound may be the most

important to the child. The infant is born with a cry. The sound of his voice fills the room. Out of a soundless envelopment, he emerges into the world of animation. Out of silence, he will travel through sound to sign to symbol.

Sounds from the outside hit a special selective sensitivity in the child's auditory perceptions. Babies wake with a start in response to sudden noise. The uniformity of quietude is first disturbed by noises. In time, the quiet empty space of the outside world is populated and animated by a diversity of sounds and voices. The emptiness has changed into a fullness of the rhythmic ripples of friendly voices, an overall rustle in the distance sprinkled with accents of shrillness here and there.

Into the time and space expanse, the infant enters the world with his first cry. Later, with his cooing, he starts to use his voice as an instrument. The immensity of distance diminishes as the child develops his voice and receives the expressions of others.

Sounds and echoes stimulate response. Sounds as they approach the child are vibrant reminders of ongoing activities. They fill distant places and bring them closer. They animate empty space. They modulate the airways in a full-range orchestration. It is not surprising that the child chimes in—first trying to reproduce sounds, then producing and creating sounds that delight him because he is able to participate and contribute to the liveliness of the

world. Above all is the wonder that he experiences as he gets in touch with others and elicits their responses.

The general background of sounds and voices and the immediate environment of a friendly address help to establish intersubjective communication. Repetition of sounds and later of words prolongs the time of the young child's expressiveness. Dialogues with himself establish his own identity and differentiate the roles he plays. Through language, the child grows in self-hood and in relatedness. With his language, he formulates his being in the world.

Language is the exquisite mediator between feeling and thought, thought and action, initiative and determination. It gives form to the desire to contact others; it gives shape to sentiment; it carries the meaning of one's intent; it is a source of happiness and accomplishment when one succeeds in expressing appropriately and exactly what one intends to express. Ontologically, it is the structure for facilitating the grasp of evanescent thoughts. Impressions that might otherwise be transitory are registered and stabilized in language.

The young child learns to speak first by imitating sounds. Then the meaning changes the sounds into signs and symbols. Symbols have a life of their own. They are fraught with meaning. They have content. They extend in

time. They are born in the world of relationships and are uniquely human. The child learns by means of language to formulate his own thoughts. He learns to use common denominators in order to be understood. He experiences his own lived time and operates with past memories and future anticipations, couched in language.

The essence of languages lies not only in its function of a vector in the transition from percept to concept or from soliloquy to dialogue, but also in the fact that language is itself experience, for speaker as well as listener. Language is the ever-present potential of fulfillment, or, as Boss® puts it, "human *language* in its deepest meaning has to be regarded as a primordial *existentialium* of human *Dasein."*

Children's private language and secrets are used to engage in a playful testing of reality. Experimentations as to what may be shared and what has to be reserved for one's own consumption increase self-confidence in one's own exclusive possessions. Language used as steppingstones from the child's enclosed confinement does not always develop in an uninterrupted way. Children babble to hear their own voices, to practice the sequence of thought, and for the sheer joy of making sounds. The young child often uses words effectively, if not conventionally. One four-year-old, describing his day at kindergarten, confided, "Now I have two friends and three unfriends."

The language of the child who is alienated and fragmented fails to establish links and bridges from one experience to another, within himself and within the world. Natural phenomena frighten these children. They reveal a lack of familiarity with experienced space and a disturbance in present time. They find themselves in a strange island of isolation where no communication prevails.

There is a resemblance between the adult failure to grasp reality and establish relatedness with it and the autistic child's failure to make himself at home in his living space. In our day, the failure of integration can be seen all through our culture. The characteristic fragmentation of modern experience is vividly presented by the artist who has cast aside traditional modes of presenting experience. Like the child who may still be striving to grasp his world wholly, to develop all the dimensions of the space and time of his existence and to integrate that experience until he is one with it, so the modem artist, a man among men, shows how experience has been split asunder and men have not been able to develop a continuing relatedness, a genuine connection with their existence. The artist presents us with a world of truncated objects. These parts may be placed into interesting arrangements, but they cannot portray and render his world as a whole because modem man does not fully occupy his living space, nor is he fully connected to the flow of time around him.

Nevertheless, this is not the way life begins. For the infant, there is no fragmentation, no alienation, no separateness. His world has no real divisions. The infant is all he is and he is all. He exists in an eternal present. He moves into the world very soon, with his body, his voice, and his senses. The world becomes his dwelling place, unless he feels rejected and cut off from the world. He brings order into the world. He reaches out—touching, grasping, making connections with life. By being lovingly responded to, by being nourished and valued, he develops responsiveness in kind. He builds bridges to objects and to people.

By distinguishing between what is under his skin and what is outside, he develops a sense of self and a sense of others. He learns to separate himself from objects and people, but he also learns to stay whole, to remain connected, to stay related—as long as he is cherished and valued for himself.

The child growing in a healthy way expands into and grasps the world and time. He develops an increasing capacity to convey and receive from experience. He comes to expect response from the people around him and in turn responds to them. A two-way movement grows between the child and the space he occupies. Even as he separates himself from that to which he responds, he remains related at the same time. In the very act of becoming aware of his individuality, the capacity for relatedness develops. Isolation and alienation are terrifying experiences; in relatedness there is peace.

In *The Little Prince,*[6] Saint-Exupéry tells of the lamp-lighter whose job it is to provide daylight and dark for all the small planets. They revolve so rapidly that the lamp-lighter is kept busy continually darting about, turning on the stars and putting them out again. To the young child, adults must often resemble the harassed lamplighter who does nothing but hurry himself and push others into meaningless hurrying along with him. In reality, as in fiction and especially from the child's point of view, the demand for haste and the call to duty leave no room for joy. Such demands are perplexing to the young child. For he quite literally "has all the time in the world."

Notes

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2 M. Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology of Perception, translated by Colin Smith (London: Routledge & Kegan, 1962).

3 Kurt Goldstein, The Organism (New York: American Book Co., 1939).

4 M. Proust, Remembrance of Things Past (New York: Random House, 1927); quoted by Georges Poulet, Studies in Human Time (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1956).

5 Rainer Maria Rilke, Stories of Cod, translated by Nora Purtscher-Wydenbruck and M. D. Herter Norton (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1932).

6 Medard Boss, Psychoanalysis and Daseinsanalysis (New York: Basic Books, 1963).

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