THE DIFFERENCE DIFFERENTIATION MAKES: EXTENDING EISNER’S ACCOUNT

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Abstract. In this analysis Jane Blanken-Webb extends Elliot Eisner’s account of how learning in the arts contributes to the creation of mind. Drawing on the psychoanalytic theory of D. W. Winnicott, Blanken-Webb argues that the acts of meaning making to which Eisner attends rely on a prior developmental achievement — namely, the establishment of self-in-relation-to-world. This prior development is important to recognize in order to appreciate all that is at stake and at play within acts of meaning making. To demonstrate this, Blanken-Webb points to reverberations of an earlier process of psychological differentiation embedded within such acts that are crucial for aesthetic experience and that carry on a continual process of refinement of self-in-relation-to-world. While Eisner has a great deal to offer regarding the importance of providing students access to multiple forms of representation, this perspective adds that in doing so we are expanding on a foundation of self-in-relation-to-world, thus facilitating an educational unfolding that is much deeper than we typically recognize.

At a time when arts programs are being cut from our schools, we need to be reminded that the aesthetic mode of learning exemplified in the arts has fundamental significance to the purposes of education itself and thus has a central role to play in schooling. Elliot Eisner is a leading advocate of this view, and he provides convincing support for the contribution of the arts serving “as models of what educational aspiration and practice might be at its very best.”1 Eisner’s core argument makes claims about human cognition and asserts that the arts play a key role in the creation of mind. In sum, Eisner’s argument starts with the assertion that we derive the content of all concepts from our ability to experience different qualities of the world that we pick up through our senses. He thus rightly links our sensory capacities directly to cognition. For Eisner, the essence of mind is reflected in the process of making qualitative distinctions in response to the environment, forming concepts, and representing those concepts. Accordingly, he tells us that the arts play a critical role in the development of mind because they fundamentally engage a process in which “perception is refined, imagination stimulated, judgment fostered, and technical skills developed” (ACM, 15) — all of which directly contribute to Eisner’s conception of mind. Hence, Eisner concludes that the arts are core to the mission of schooling, as they epitomize the essence of mind.

In addition to the invaluable contribution Eisner affords through this core argument that reveals the formative role the arts can and do play in the creation of mind, there is another important theme that emerges throughout his work that is worthy of attention. Speaking beyond representation alone, Eisner states, “it

1. Elliot W. Eisner, The Arts and the Creation of Mind [New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2002], xii. This work will be cited in the text as ACM for all subsequent references.
is the process, the immersion in the activity itself and the quality of life that it makes possible, that should command more of our attention. The arts remind us of what life can be at its most vital” (ACM, 203). This idea is present throughout Eisner’s work, addressing a realm that extends beyond the doings of mind alone and embracing a more encompassing notion of self. In this, aesthetic experience in itself proves meaningful.

We find this idea again to be strongly present in Eisner’s assertion that “among the most important ideas The Arts and the Creation of Mind addresses is the idea that humans are meaning-making creatures. All of us wish to create meaningful experience” (ACM, 230). And indeed, it is out of Eisner’s commitment to meaningful experience that he argues in support of providing access to the multiple forms of representation through education in the arts, as “each form of representation we employ confers its own features upon the meanings we make or interpret” (ACM, 230). However, what I want to draw out is that the type of meaning making Eisner focuses on requires more than the workings of mind alone and relies on a prior developmental achievement, namely, the establishment of self-in-relation-to-world. Going further, the reason this prior development is important is because the subsequent meaning making Eisner attends to carries with it not only an echo — a repetition — of an earlier drama, but indeed a reverberation, carrying on a significant process that continues to refine self-in-relation-to-world. In this, we find the essence of creative living; the very thing D. W. Winnicott tells us gives meaning to life itself.

Thus, I will show that there is even more to be said about the value of aesthetic education underlying Eisner’s insights regarding the arts’ capacity to develop the mind. As such, my goal in this essay is to extend Eisner’s account, providing a deeper appreciation for aesthetic experience itself by drawing out the developmental foundation upon which such experience not only relies, but continues to function in the present day. I will establish that meaning making is fundamentally an act of self-in-relation-to-world and is therefore, first and foremost, an act of self and, secondarily, a doing of mind. It is fitting that the path for making this case lies directly in line with the trajectory Eisner follows; however, I will be taking a much deeper look at the process of differentiation by considering contributions from psychoanalytic theory in order to appreciate the immense significance this process entails in our early lives at the time of differentiation and beyond. In this exploration, the psychoanalytic perspective emerges as having a great deal to offer in describing the richness of meaning making itself in addition to addressing the environmental conditions that support the process of meaning making. Furthermore, the psychoanalytic perspective strengthens our understanding of the critical role aesthetics plays within education through providing a fuller account of the developmental foundation of all aesthetic

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phenomena and its connection to the process of differentiation and meaning making.

THE NEED FOR A DEEPER LOOK AT DIFFERENTIATION

Like John Dewey’s approach, Eisner’s argument is grounded in the fact that, at base, we are organisms embedded in an environment. He begins with the assertion that we are biologically designed to be sensitive to the qualities of our environment, but the activation of our sensory system requires that we meet a properly supportive environment in order for this capacity to come to fruition:

The actualization of capacity, that is, its transformation from capacity to ability, depends on both what the individual brings to the environment and what the environment brings to the individual. During the course of human development there are certain critical periods during which stimulation and nurture of sensory capacities are crucial. (ACM, 20)

We can see this idea reflected in Eisner’s account of differentiation. Put simply, to differentiate means to distinguish, to make or render different, and Eisner’s account focuses on sensory differentiation, a significant process in which children learn to make distinctions based on the various sensory qualities they experience within their environment. As he explains, some objects in our environment are large or loud whereas other objects are smooth or sweet. We respond to these distinctions, recall them in memory, and even manipulate them in imagination. Furthermore, as we gain more experience with the world, we become more sophisticated in our capacity to differentiate. In this vein, Eisner says, “as children mature, their ability to experience qualities in the environment becomes increasingly differentiated” (ACM, 20). He tells us that it is exploration that leads to the construction of distinctions among the qualities encountered in the environment. This account suggests that as long as a child’s sensory capacities are intact and he or she meets an environment sufficiently rich in qualitative differences, the child will develop the capacity to distinguish among qualities within the environment.

While this account essentially holds true, I would like to deepen the discussion by taking seriously the idea that the distinctions discerned from the environment are in service of a self-in-relation-to-world and are not discerned simply for their own sake. Accordingly, Dewey asserts that “the dictionary will inform anyone who consults it that early use of words like sweet and bitter was not to denote qualities of sense as such but to discriminate things as favorable and hostile” — that is, as favorable or hostile to a self-in-relation-to-world. Thus, I maintain that the ability to make such distinctions rests on a more fundamental psychological capacity of self-in-relation-to-world and that the further refinement of sensory differentiation that Eisner addresses is secondary to this fundamental development. This is important to recognize because even if the conditions Eisner details do provide a child with the ability to notice and respond to the distinctions in texture, size,


shape, smell, and sound that the environment provides, this is not to say that these distinctions would necessarily be meaningful — that is, related to self and world. Hence, I contend that in order for the information discerned from the environment to be meaningful, we need to account for more than simply sensory detection of qualitative differences. As such, the process of sensory differentiation that Eisner describes emerges as a secondary development that relies on a more fundamental process of psychological differentiation.

In order to demonstrate how this idea extends and deepens Eisner’s account, I turn to an example he uses to illustrate the trajectory that connects the development of a four-week-old infant to that of a forty-year-old:

The extent to which sensory systems can be used to distinguish among those qualities to which they are biologically sensitive depends in part on the organism’s prior experience and developmental history. For example, the four-week-old infant must learn how to focus and how to track moving objects, but so must the forty-year-old adult who is first learning how to hunt. While the adult has all of the physiological prerequisites, other necessary conditions — prior hunting experience, for example — may be missing. As for the infant, both the physiological and the experiential conditions that are lacking will soon be gained, for, at about the age of four months, both the ability to focus and to track are well-developed skills in the normal child.4

Stated differently, the eye movement of the four-week-old infant eventually leads the child to be able to track and focus reliably at four months of age. Continuing the example, Eisner links the physiological achievements acquired in infancy to the activity of the now forty-year-old who is hunting for the first time. While this adult may indeed lack the experiential prerequisite of prior hunting experience needed to effectively demonstrate the skills of visual differentiation required in hunting, she is drawing from the advanced physiological abilities she has acquired since the time of infancy in addition to a plethora of other experiences with the world in which she has refined her capacity to visually differentiate. Thus, the ability to differentiate requires both physiological and experiential achievements, and we build on what has been acquired in the past as we continually refine our capacity to differentiate.

In this account it seems that Eisner is placing the tracking and focusing activity of the infant within the same line of developmental continuity as the tracking and focusing activity in relation to hunting. However, I do not believe that such an analysis goes far enough to address the vast differences between the two cases. At one level we can see that although the hunter is “reading” the landscape with naïve eyes, she is drawing on an already firmly established ability to discern the stones from the field, whereas the activity of the neonate is qualitatively different. Indeed, at this point in development, the eye movement of the four-week-old is essentially a matter of physical stimulus and response, as she is only beginning to perceive the most basic distinctions within the visual array.

But there is an even more fundamental difference between the two cases. The eye movement of the forty-year-old hunter is imbued with meaning derived from interaction with an external, shared reality that has social significance, and this is not at all the case for the neonate. Where Eisner presents a continuum, I see a more radical break. Within the scope Eisner provides in this example, the two cases strike me as being fundamentally different, although I will refine my position on this point later in the essay. Hence, in addition to consideration of sensory differentiation, we must also take into account the development of the psychological capacity to experience the world as external and separate from — but related to — the self. Indeed, in order for qualitative distinctions in the environment to be meaningful, we must first develop the more fundamental psychological capacity to distinguish what is “me” from what is “not me.”

Accordingly, in addition to the account Eisner provides regarding the development of our sensory capacity to differentiate qualities within our environment, I suggest we look more deeply into the psychological capacity to distinguish what is “me” from what is “not me” in order to gain a richer understanding of the process of differentiation. In doing so, I will be relying on the psychoanalytic use of the term “differentiation.” Although different from Eisner’s usage, the link between Eisner’s discussion of sensory differentiation and the psychological differentiation I wish to explore is stronger than mere terminology. Indeed, I maintain that Eisner’s usage of the term is a direct extension of the process described within psychoanalytic theory. Thus, one difficulty with using the term “differentiation” in reference to the visual fields of both hunter and neonate is that they are not only differentiating between the various objects held in relationship within the visual field, they are also distinguishing what is “me” and “not me.” In this, there might indeed be a radical break between the activities of the neonate and the hunter.

**Extending Eisner’s Account**

Ultimately, the reason I believe it is important to recognize the difference psychological differentiation makes is because of the crucial insight it provides for understanding the realms of culture, play, and aesthetic experience. In short, psychological differentiation, the process that develops the capacity for a relation between self and world, establishes a space in between the two that Winnicott termed transitional phenomena. In the next section I will engage in a much more detailed description of Winnicott’s transitional phenomena in order to show the deep significance of what is at stake in this developmental unfolding; however, before doing so, I want to take a closer look at Eisner’s work in order to draw attention to the points at which the concept of transitional phenomena stands to productively extend Eisner’s account.

My basic claim is that underlying the acts of representation central to Eisner’s account of mind resides a capacity of self upon which these acts necessarily rely in order to be meaningful — that is, related to a self and world. Significantly, this capacity involves the ability to experience the space in between self and world. This in-between space is essentially an experiential realm of play that both
separates and connects what is inside and outside of the self. Winnicott maintains that transitional phenomena are the foundation of meaning making. And if we take this idea seriously, the acts of representation that Eisner addresses necessarily invoke transitional phenomena. This is a crucial insight for appreciating the full richness of the acts of representation that Eisner details, but, going even further, this enables us to see that play and aesthetic experience are at the very core of meaning making.

Eisner describes four cognitive processes that are used in acts of representation, and I maintain that if we attend closely enough to these processes, we will begin to hear the reverberations of transitional phenomena residing within each of them. The first cognitive process Eisner addresses is inscribing, in which an idea or image is made more durable through manifestation in some kind of material form. This stabilizes the idea or image, but it is “never, to be sure, in the exact form in which it was originally experienced” (ACM, 6). For my purposes, this process is of the utmost significance, as it epitomizes self-in-relation-to-world and I read the next two processes Eisner addresses to be derivative of this fundamental act of meaning making. The second cognitive process Eisner discusses, editing, is a precise process of “making the work, work” through “paying attention to relationships and attending to details” (ACM, 6). Communication is the third cognitive process Eisner describes, and it is this process that, in my view, provides the major thrust behind Eisner’s work taken as a whole. Communication entails “the transformation of consciousness into a public form” (ACM, 6), and this is something that Eisner feels is taken for granted too much of the time. Eisner asks, “How does speech, or an imagined image, or a melody we hear in our head get communicated? What must the ‘reader’ do for it to make sense, that is, to be meaningful?” (ACM, 7). Eisner contends that the role of education is to facilitate these acts of mind through enabling access to forms of representation.

It is the fourth cognitive process Eisner identifies that most overtly touches upon Winnicott’s discussion of play. Significantly, “for Winnicott the opposite of play is not work but coercion.” Drawing on this experiential realm of play, Eisner cites “the discovery of ends in process, which in turn generates surprise” (ACM, 7), as the fourth cognitive process. Eisner describes the emergence of new possibilities that present themselves in the course of working and the surprise that this engenders. I am reminded of the hours I spent in practice rooms as a music student going over the same scales or études again and again, only to suddenly hear an old, familiar passage in a new way. Perhaps this was through a new point of emphasis in a phrase or hearing a scale as a whole unit rather than a series of notes in a technical passage. This moment of surprise is indicative of the paradox — and the acceptance of the paradox — that Winnicott maintains is central in transitional phenomena — specifically, that what is created is also discovered. And Eisner, too, recognizes this paradox: “Put succinctly, surprise, a fundamental reward of all creative work, is bestowed by the work on its maker” (ACM, 7).

Within the context of Eisner’s discussion, I believe that the need for consideration of the broader realm of the self becomes most apparent through the fourth cognitive process, as it is not a matter of skill or knowledge that engenders the discovery of ends in process, but rather rich engagement within experience that is made possible by utilizing our capacity to experience transitional phenomena. This lines up well with Winnicott’s approach, in which “for both patient and analyst playing replaced knowing as the aim and the means of analysis. The mother, and her later counterpart, the analyst, could enable but should not, in Winnicott’s view, inform or teach.” I believe that if we took this idea more seriously in education, this fourth cognitive process, in particular, would be more fully supported. Eisner elaborates on this fourth cognitive process elegantly in saying, “Opportunities in the process of working are encountered that were not envisioned when the work began, but that speak so eloquently about the promise of emerging possibilities that new options are pursued” [ACM, 7].

It is important that we do not overlook that fact that the capacity to use the third area of living, transitional phenomena, is essential in order for this — and, indeed, for all four of the cognitive processes Eisner addresses — to come to fruition. In order to fully appreciate this, I maintain that we need to step back from a focus on mental doings and consider the broader role of the self. While the field of education as a whole has done a lot to address the realm of mental doings, considerations of this broader realm are less common; this is problematic if we aspire to facilitate these four cognitive processes.

Thus, this perspective reveals that there is much more at play than we typically account for in discussions of education. Going further, the broader dimension of the self-in-relation-to-world is important for the field of education to recognize because in facilitating these four cognitive processes, education must draw on its foundation. And the expansion of this foundation within education relies on a properly supportive environment in order to enable such unfoldings. As such, when Winnicott refers to the hampering of the ability to use transitional phenomena by ongoing environmental factors that stifle the creative process, there is great value for education in understanding the conditions that hinder as well as support this unfolding. Thus, a key question for an education that aspires to facilitate acts of representation and the creativity inherent therein is this: What are the environmental conditions that support the emergence of these four cognitive processes? On this point, the psychoanalytic perspective has much to offer.

**D. W. Winnicott, Differentiation, and Transitional Phenomena**

In using the term “differentiation” to refer to the psychological capacity to distinguish what is “me” from what is “not me,” I am drawing on the psychoanalytic meaning of the term. Essentially, the psychoanalytic notion of differentiation

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refers to the process babies and young children go through in separating from the mother and developing their own sense of self. Taking into account the fact that we were all literally one with the mother in-utero, psychoanalytic theory upholds that psychological separation with the mother does not occur at birth when physical separation occurs. Thus, according to Winnicott, “Psychologically, the infant takes from a breast that is part of the infant, and the mother gives milk to an infant that is part of herself.” If, for my purposes here, we extend this idea to Eisner’s example of the four-week-old infant, since visual stimuli at this very early stage in development is just another component of the all-encompassing experience of oneness and merger with the mother [and, by extension, the world], so too is the mother the beholder of the meaning of the visual terrain. D. W. Winnicott expressed this idea poignantly when, in the middle of a seminar in 1942, he exclaimed, “There’s no such thing as a baby! ... [I]f you show me a baby you certainly show me also someone caring for the baby.” Hence, in the beginning, the entire unit of the baby is comprised in the environment–individual setup, or the nursing couple. The process through which the baby emerges as a unit and comes to distinguish “me” from “not me” is the process of differentiation at its most fundamental level. From this perspective, we can see that the process of differentiation is primarily about the development of self-in-relation-to-world, and that the development of sensory capacities and the perception of qualitative differences in the environment that Eisner emphasizes is a secondary matter that builds on this foundation.

Before jumping further into a discussion of differentiation from a psychoanalytic perspective, I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge that there is no direct or definitive way of knowing infantile experience. For that matter, I acknowledge that I have no way of knowing what the four-week-old infant in Eisner’s example is experiencing or what the tracking and focusing activity she is developing means to her. Nevertheless, Winnicott’s discussion about the process of differentiation makes sense to me on a number of levels, and I find it to be persuasive. Additionally, I consider the fact that Winnicott had a great deal of clinical experience working with mothers and infants to be encouraging (although admittedly not conclusive). Thus, I ultimately leave it to the reader to determine for him- or herself the merits of Winnicott’s account, but ask for the temporary suspension of any disbelief in order to allow Winnicott’s account to emerge and potentially resonate.

7. D. W. Winnicott, Playing and Reality (1971; repr. London: Routledge, 2008), 16. This work will be cited in the text as PR for all subsequent references.

8. D. W. Winnicott, “Anxiety Associated with Insecurity” (1952), cited in Jan Abram, The Language of Winnicott: A Dictionary and Guide to Understanding His Work (Northvale, New Jersey: Jason Aronson, 1996), 2–3. Abram’s book is a comprehensive anthology of Winnicott’s work. She compiles extensive excerpts from his writings, papers, and other archival materials, organizing these according to the concepts central to his theories. She includes a complete bibliography of Winnicott’s work, and many of the Winnicott quotations I use in this essay come from this source.

9. Indeed, Winnicott was a pediatrician before he became a psychoanalyst, and therefore there is a rich experiential basis underlying his theoretical account.
The Process of Differentiation

The process of differentiation involves a complex interaction between the baby and the mothering environment (which is not limited to the mother alone, and need not involve the biological mother at all). Broadly, there are two main phases to the process of differentiation: illusionment and disillusionment. The first phase involves an intense period following birth in which the mother goes into a state of preoccupation with her baby so extreme that Winnicott likens it to an illness. Indeed, it is a state of supreme psychological merger that supplies the necessary conditions for a basic sense of security and trust to be formed, enabling the next phase to be meaningful. Facilitated by the mother’s gradual “recovery” from this illness, the second phase begins when the mother remembers that she is a separate person, and, in doing so, she aids her baby in realizing the same thing.

At the start, by adapting almost perfectly to her baby’s needs, the mother supports an illusion of the baby’s omnipotence — in other words, from the baby’s perspective, it is he that creates the world around him.10

The breast is created by the infant over and over again out of the infant’s capacity to love or [one can say] out of need. A subjective phenomenon develops in the baby, which we call the mother’s breast. The mother places the actual breast just there where the infant is ready to create, and at the right moment. (PR, 15)

It is the mother’s supreme identification with her baby that allows for this necessary illusion. Furthermore, this extraordinary task performed by what Winnicott termed the “ordinary devoted mother” lays a foundation of being:

The important thing is that I am means nothing unless I at the beginning am along with another human being who has not yet been differentiated off. For this reason it is more true to talk about being than to use the words I am, which belong to the next stage. It cannot be overemphasized that being is the beginning of everything, without which doing and being done have no significance.11

Winnicott tells us that supreme merger with the mothering environment at the beginning of life provides the necessary foundation for a life lived creatively: “Creativity is the doing that arises out of being.”12 Thus, the experience of omnipotence a mother affords her baby at the beginning is retained throughout life in the form of creative impulse — an impulse that is not a special endowment for the artist alone, but is “something that is present when anyone . . . looks in a healthy way at anything or does anything deliberately” (PR, 92). Indeed, we are born in a state of merger with the environment, and we depend on the environment

10. My use of “he” in reference to the baby and throughout this recurrent example is intended to clarify the positions of mother (she) and baby (he). It should be understood that my use of “he” or “she” is intended to provide clarity of position and is not intended to stipulate gender. The “mother” in my discussion could very well be a man and the baby could certainly be male or female.


to provide the support necessary at the beginning in order to meaningfully start to separate out in the next phase of differentiation.

Disillusionment is a gradual and precarious process in which the mother and baby separate from each other, enabling the realization of a world that is separate from — but related to — a self. While disillusionment is only possible if the illusion of omnipotence has been sufficiently supported at the start, it is the process of disillusionment that ultimately separates out what is “me” from what is “not me.” Furthermore, Eisner’s conception of mind begins to emerge through the process of disillusionment, but so too does the self — which is broader than Eisner’s conception of mind, as it encompasses independent initiative and purpose in addition to the doings of mind.

Through lessening her degree of adaptation in a way that meets her baby’s growing ability to contend with frustration, a mother disillusions her baby. The baby will have to wait a little longer to be fed, for example, and through such small but manageable “failures” on the part of the mother, she allows for her baby to discover himself. Indeed, the creative gesture that emerges out of frustration in the form of a cry or protest brings forth the moment that the baby can start to discover himself as a separate being from the mother: “By ‘failing’ in this way, the mother unknowingly, allows the infant to feel and experience his needs. This ‘failure’ contributes to his developing sense of self.”13 At the same time, the baby is discovering the actual world that is, of course, not really under his omnipotent control. In this way, the process of learning the world and learning the self form two sides of the same coin of differentiation.

Precarious is perhaps one of the best words to describe the process of disillusionment because it must be fine-tuned to meet the baby’s growing developmental needs, which are constantly shifting. “If the external opposition is too intrusive, the baby can only react, rather than respond. Reacting to impingements, in Winnicott’s terminology, means that the infant’s sense of self and continuity-of-being is interrupted. . . . This is what constitutes a violation of self.”14 The opposite extreme of impingement is the mother who clings to her infant and in remaining merged never allows the baby to separate out what is “me” from what is “not me.” Moreover, as the baby develops, there is a constant vacillation of needs:

We see therefore that in infancy and in management of infants there is a very subtle distinction between the mother’s understanding of her infant’s need based on empathy, and her change over to an understanding based on something in the infant or small child that indicates need. This is particularly difficult for mothers because of the fact that children vacillate between one state and the other; one minute they are merged with their mothers, and require empathy, while the next they are separated from her, and then if she knows their needs in advance she is dangerous, a witch.15

However, through providing the appropriate support at the appropriate time, the mother is gradually relieved of her adaptive function, as “the infant’s mind and the infant’s intellectual processes [become] able to account for and so to allow for failures of adaptation.”\(^\text{16}\) Winnicott provides an example of the moment such intelligence emerges:

Think of an infant expecting a feed. The time comes when the infant can wait a few minutes because noises in the kitchen indicate that food is about to appear. Instead of simply being excited by the noises, the infant uses the news item in order to be able to wait.\(^\text{17}\)

This marks a significant point in a baby’s development and also marks the point at which Eisner’s notion of mind enters into Winnicott’s discussion of differentiation. In forming the concept of the arrival of food derived from information picked up through the senses, the baby in Winnicott’s example is enacting the initial aspects of mind that Eisner describes, that is, sensory differentiation and concept formation. Eisner tells us, “The formulation of concepts is, in a sense, a data-reduction process of distilling the essential features of an array of qualities so that they stand for a larger class of phenomena” (\(\text{ACM}, 21\)). In the case of the baby in Winnicott’s example, this involves reducing sensory data from the noises the baby hears into essential features that have come to stand for the arrival of food. However, connecting Winnicott’s example to his theory of differentiation tells us that there is much more going on than Eisner’s account addresses. First, the baby is becoming aware of his need, which is separate from the environment. Thus, the baby is learning both self and world. Second, the baby is learning to tolerate the frustration of not having his need met because he has an idea — a symbol — of food arriving soon. This symbol is not just mental activity that formed a concept disconnected from purpose and intention, but is rather something that he [the baby] can make use of, putting self and world in relation to one another. And, third, this symbol provides a connection between the baby and food, which is ultimately a symbol of connection with mother. Thus, in a healthy way the baby is warding off separation because he is filling in the potential space between himself and mother with his own creative act of concept formation. This last aspect is exactly in line with Winnicott’s transitional phenomena.

While Eisner’s discussion of differentiation and mind accounts for aspects of the world in relation to sensory perception and mental activity, Winnicott’s scope is broader, encompassing the self as a whole in relation to the world. This difference in scope is likely reflective of the fact that Eisner focuses on school-age children, whereas Winnicott’s focus is on infancy. I believe that Winnicott’s emphasis on the foundational aspects of human development enriches Eisner’s discussion by providing an appreciation of the immense role that the process of differentiation


continues to play throughout life. To show how this is the case, I will now turn directly to a discussion of Winnicott’s notion of transitional phenomena.

**Transitional Phenomena**

The concept of transitional phenomena is critical for my purposes not only because it is pivotal to the process of differentiation occurring in infancy and early childhood, but more significantly because it provides a conceptual framework for understanding a realm of experience that occurs throughout life which offers particular insight into the arts. Abram describes transitional phenomena well in observing, “the concept of transitional phenomena refers to a dimension of living that belongs neither to internal nor to external reality; rather, it is the place that both connects and separates inner and outer.”

This experiential realm fits well within Dewey’s conception of aesthetic experience and thus serves to deepen Eisner’s account on multiple levels. In addition to deepening Eisner’s discussion of differentiation, the concept of transitional phenomena remains a strong counterpart throughout Eisner’s discussion of the arts.

Although we experience transitional phenomena throughout life, at base this concept is linked to the process of differentiation occurring in infancy and early childhood. It is epitomized in a baby’s first object — a soft doll or toy, the corner of a blanket, or even a baby’s own hand or fist. This is the object that first transitions from being “me” to “not me,” making it possible for the baby to symbolize and to have a relationship between internal and external reality. From the baby’s perspective, this object is both “me” and “not me”: it is both created by the baby and discovered as an aspect of an already present world; it is paradoxical through and through — and it is vital that this paradox be accepted.

I should like to put in a reminder here that the essential feature in the concept of transitional objects and phenomena (according to my presentation of the subject) is the paradox, and the acceptance of the paradox: the baby creates the object, but the object was there waiting to be created. . . . I tried to draw attention to this aspect of transitional phenomena by claiming that in the rules of the game we all know that we will never challenge the baby to elicit an answer to the question: did you create that or did you find it? [PR, 119]

Thus, as “one of the bridges that make[s] contact possible between the individual psyche and external reality,” parents accept this paradox and allow their child to carry around his or her first object at all times, allowing it to get dirty because they know that washing it would introduce “a break in continuity in the infant’s experience, a break that may destroy the meaning and value of the object to the infant.”

At the time of disillusionment, when the mother becomes gradually less available to her baby, this first object comes to symbolize the mother who, from

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the baby’s perspective, is not yet separate. In times of her physical absence, the baby psychologically holds onto her through the use of the transitional object. Over time the quality of the baby’s interaction with the object changes. At the start, Winnicott describes the interaction between the baby and the transitional object as object-relating, in which the object is subjectively perceived — just as the mother is a part of the baby at this point, so too is the first object. However, if all goes well in the process of disillusionment, the quality of this interaction gradually changes into what Winnicott termed object-usage, in which the object becomes external and separate from the baby — it has withstood all of the baby’s aggression as well as love and remained intact and separate.

Once this occurs, the object itself is no longer needed; however, this critical object has enabled a new capacity within the child that is of immense importance. This capacity extends well beyond the use of a single object, establishing a space that can be filled in with creative play, the use of symbols, and with all that eventually adds up to cultural life [PR, 147]. Indeed, Winnicott argues that in one sense, there is no actual separation for humans between baby and mother, child and family, individual and society or world. This is because we fill in the gap, which in reality does of course exist, with symbol and creative play: “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 I am describing” [PR, 145]. Winnicott contends that this potential space is the “location” in which we spend most of our time when we are experiencing life.

Thus, Winnicott directly links our highest cultural achievements with a child’s play at the time of differentiation.

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. [PR, 143]

Thus, the process of differentiation not only enables the distinction between internal and external reality, but it enables the capacity for a third area of living:

My claim is that if there is a need for this double statement, there is a need for a triple one; there is a third part of the life of a human being, a part that we cannot ignore, an intermediate area of experiencing, to which inner reality and external life both contribute. It is an area which 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 inter-related.21

Although Winnicott admits that he cannot precisely define the word “culture,” he is quite clear that we can only benefit from “the common pool of humanity, into which individuals and groups of people may contribute, and from which we may all draw if we have somewhere to put what we find.”22 Thus, Winnicott tells us

21. Ibid., 338.

that successfully realizing the process of differentiation enables the capacity for play, culture, creativity, art, religion, not to mention the feeling that life itself is worth living.

This perspective reveals that differentiation entails a great deal more than sensory capacity alone and provides much more detail regarding the considerable difference between the eye movement of the four-week-old and that of the forty-year-old in Eisner’s example. However, at this point, I find myself in a position to back off a bit from a claim that I made previously regarding the difference between the two cases. Previously, I referred to the two cases Eisner presents as being fundamentally different and noted that I envision a more radical break where Eisner describes a continuum. However, now that we have arrived at a level of much greater specificity regarding the process of differentiation, I am in a position to refine this statement a bit. The fundamental difference I was referring to pertains to the establishment of a self that is separate from the world while still being related to it. However, Winnicott’s detailed account of the process by which this achievement occurs reveals that psychological differentiation, too, occurs along a continuum. Thus, the degree of difference between the two cases depends on the precision of the lens through which we are looking.

The Extreme End of the Continuum of Differentiation

Continuing this discussion of Winnicott’s theory, I will next address Winnicott’s account of the extreme end of the continuum of differentiation — specifically, his discussion of psychosis. This is one of the more controversial aspects of Winnicott’s theory, and I would like to clarify that, for my purposes here, it is not important whether Winnicott is right about psychosis itself, as my interest in psychosis is theoretical rather than clinical. As a manifestation of a self that is not firmly established as separate but related to the world, the case of psychosis provides a way to understand the extreme end of the continuum of differentiation. And this affords a great deal of insight into how the process of differentiation — in its full range of manifestations — plays out in human life, especially as it relates to aesthetic phenomena.

Winnicott viewed psychosis essentially as an “environmental deficiency disease,” ascribing its etiology to very early environmental failures that disrupt the process of differentiation: “I admit that some infants are more difficult to nurture than others, but as we are not out to blame anyone, we can ascribe the cause of illness here to a failure in nurture.”23 Indeed, this is an extreme view of the etiology of psychosis, and it is common today to consider environmental conditions as only one of several potential contributing factors to the occurrence of psychotic illness. Accordingly, the fourth edition of the American Psychiatric Association’s Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders states,

“Although much evidence suggests the importance of genetic factors in the etiology of Schizophrenia [one of the major psychotic illnesses], the existence of a substantial discordance rate in monozygotic twins also indicates the importance of environmental factors.”

Notably, this statement is not included in the most recent edition, the DSM-5. As my purpose is not to determine the cause of psychosis, I maintain that Winnicott’s view on this matter is germane to this discussion despite any controversy about his claim.

As a psychoanalyst, Winnicott was deeply aware of the vital role the capacity for transitional phenomena plays in human life. In enabling a “person’s inner world [to be] related to the outer or actual world and yet ... personal and capable of an aliveness of its own,” the process of differentiation, when successful, makes it possible to live meaningfully and creatively. I believe that for Winnicott, the meaning of life resides in creative living. While this is something we all struggle with at times, Winnicott tells us that the more extreme struggles of psychotic patients provide a way for us to understand what human life is all about:

What is life about? You may cure your patient and not know what it is that makes him or her go on living. It is of the first importance for us to acknowledge openly that absence of psychoneurotic illness may be health, but it is not life. Psychotic patients who are all the time hovering between living and not living force us to look at this problem, one that really belongs not to psychoneurotics but to all human beings. I am claiming that these same phenomena that are life and death to our schizoid or borderline patients appear in our cultural experiences. It is these cultural experiences that provide the continuity in the human race that transcends the personal existence. I am assuming that cultural experiences are in direct continuity with play, the play of those who have not yet heard of games. [PR, 134–135]

This portrayal opens the discussion of differentiation even further, as the case of psychotic illness provides a counterpart to a citation Eisner includes in his discussion of sensory differentiation pertaining to some famous research on kittens. This research showed that “kittens whose eyes have been occluded during the first few months of life lose their capacity to see when the occlusions are removed” [ACM, 20]. Thus, just as there are necessary environmental contributions in the development of sensory capacities, Winnicott’s claim about the actualization of the psychological capacity to differentiate is in line with Eisner’s assertion that “the actualization of a capacity … depends on both what the individual brings to the environment and what the environment brings to the individual” [ACM, 20]. Indeed, the case of psychotic illness gives us living proof that the capacity for psychological differentiation [that is, to distinguish “me”


from “not me”) is not something that can be taken for granted. Winnicott refers to psychosis as a “failure of the structuring of the personal self, and the capacity of the self for relating to objects that are of the environment,” thus placing psychosis at the heart of the process of differentiation.28

Winnicott’s view of psychosis exemplifies the very Deweyan notion of the integral relationship between organism and environment, asserting that sanity and insanity alike are not features of isolated individuals, but rather appear in the interaction of individuals with their environments. Drawing on a quotation from a friend of his, Winnicott expresses this idea:

“Insanity is not being able to find anyone to stand you,” and here there are two factors: the degree of illness in the patient and the ability of the environment to tolerate the symptoms. In this way there are some in the world who are more ill than some of those who are in mental hospitals.29

From this perspective, the problem of insanity is not unrelated to the problems all of us face in everyday living. (Alas, according to this view, we are all insane at least some of the time!) Moreover, Winnicott views all mental illness as an “exaggeration of elements” that occur normally and notes specifically that “we do not see anything which would put psychiatrically ill people in a place apart.”30 This is not to dismiss the very real problems that psychotics and others who are psychiatrically ill face, but rather to understand these problems as extreme manifestations of the struggles we all encounter.

The Aesthetic Realm

Indeed, what is vital at the time of differentiation in infancy and childhood continues to be important throughout life. Just as Winnicott exclaimed in 1942 that “there’s no such thing as a baby” separate from the mothering environment, he extended this idea into adulthood in 1971: “When one speaks of a man one speaks of him along with the summation of his cultural experiences. The whole forms a unit” (PR, 133). Hence, we continually draw upon our capacity to experientially fill in the potential space between self and world, and this is evident in the subtle and ongoing nature of transitional phenomena. “The potential space varies greatly from individual to individual, and its foundation is the baby’s trust in the mother experienced over a long-enough period at the critical stage of the separation of the not-me from the me, when the establishment of an autonomous self is at the initial stage” (PR, 148). Although in health we do not need the same degree of environmental support required at the time of differentiation because a basic trust in the environment has been established, this is no way denies the ongoing and pervasive nature of transitional phenomena. As Winnicott states,

It is assumed here that the task of reality-acceptance is never completed, that no human being is ever free from the strain of relating inner and outer reality, and that relief from this strain

28. Winnicott, Home Is Where we Start From, 105.
29. Ibid., 109.
30. Ibid., 105.
is provided by an intermediate area of experience which is not challenged (arts, religion, etc.)
This intermediate area is in direct continuity with the play area of the small child who is
"lost" in play.31

Thus, immersed in a cocoon of sound, a high school musician consciously
awaits the arrival of her impending flute entrance while also allowing for a measure
of absorption among the sounds objectively emanating from the instruments of her
fellow musicians and her own internal world. As she prepares to play the first note
of her entrance — a C# right above the staff, perhaps the most open and vulnerable
of notes because it literally involves the release of all control by the fingers — she
breathes in the sound around her and places herself within the acoustic array. She
has trust that the ensemble around her will support her voice, which at this point is
one and the same with her own, as she reaches back unconsciously to a time when
she took initial steps away from her mother, on some level unaware of and therefore
unthreatened by the distance she was physically enacting because of the support
her environment provided that made it possible for her to fill in the gap, maintain-
ing connection despite the void incurred. It is her capacity to do so — to stay close
as she steps away, to use the sounds around her to hold her — that makes possi-
ble fresh exploration in the world. And as an extender of the aesthetic realm, her
teacher oversees and facilitates this expansion, fulfilling a function that is no doubt
different, but in a meaningful way similar to that of her mother way back when.

Resting at the intersection between self and world, Winnicott’s realm of
transitional phenomena facilitates the aesthetic dimension at a core level. Thus,
Winnicott’s deeper look at the process of differentiation opens Eisner’s discussion
of mind and the arts considerably by including the concept of self-in-relation-to-
world.32 Beyond Eisner’s account of mind, the concept of self speaks to motivation,
meaning, and, indeed, what makes life itself worth living. Perhaps the most
significant insight that I take away from Winnicott is that what distinguishes
living from merely existing is being able to creatively fill in the potential space
between self and world. And on this point, Eisner’s account of mind reenters the
picture, as his discussion of meaning and representation provide the mechanisms
through which this is achieved.

MEANING AND REPRESENTATION

The three main terms that come into play within Eisner’s discussion of
mind are sensation, conception, and representation.33 A fourth term, meaning, is
integral to the workings of this conception of mind; however, I think that we need
to embrace Winnicott’s discussion of differentiation in order to appreciate the full
richness of what this fourth term adds. Hence, when something is considered to be

32. It would also be sufficient to merely say self, as there can be no self except in relation to the world.
33. Indeed, these are the three terms that Eisner mentions in the first sentence of the preface to Cognition
and Curriculum Reconsidered: “This book is about the relationship among sensation, conception, and
representation,” ix.
meaningful, I contend that there is more going on than sensation, conception, and representation. Indeed, discussions of meaning entail a self-in-relation-to-world and thus invoke the deeper notion of differentiation that Winnicott provides.

It is clear that meaning is vital to Eisner’s overall project. Indeed, Eisner attests, “The ability to secure meaning in the course of our experience is a basic human need; we all want to lead meaningful lives. But meaning is not simply found; it is constructed.” Commencing from this point, Eisner focuses on representation and the importance of learning how to be “multi-literate” in order have access to the full range of meanings made available through culture: “Literacy, as I use the term, is the ability to encode or decode meaning in any of the forms of representation used in the culture to convey or express meaning.” Thus, Eisner contends that one of the major aims of education is to develop “students’ ability to access meaning within the variety of forms of representation that humans use to represent the contents of their consciousness.” This lends a great deal of support to arts education and science or math education alike, as “each form of representation has a special contribution to make to human experience.”

However, I urge that we pause a moment to consider the meaning the construction of meaning has in terms of Winnicott’s discussion of differentiation before moving on to the issue of representation. Hence, prior to consideration of overt acts of representation, I believe it is fruitful to consider more modest acts of perception as a key to appreciating that the meaning and creativity implicated in such acts is, indeed, embedded within this less complicated scope. Winnicott tells us that a trace of the infantile experience of creating the world remains in all acts of perception, as “what is objectively perceived is by definition to some extent subjectively conceived of” (PR, 88). Thus, even the act of looking and seeing is inherently creative and invokes transitional phenomena, filling in the space between sensory stimuli and meaning. As Adam Phillips surmises from a Winnicottian perspective, “Perception — looking at things — is an addition to, but must never be separated from, apperception — seeing oneself.” While Eisner tells us that the ability to encode and decode forms of representation makes it possible to derive meaning from acts of perception, Winnicott adds that such acts emanate from a self and that there is an essential component of creativity invested in these acts:

The creativity that we are studying belongs to the approach of the individual to external reality. Assuming reasonable brain capacity, enough intelligence to enable the individual to become a person living and taking part in the life of community, everything that happens is creative except in so far as the individual is ill, or is hampered by ongoing environmental factors which stifle his creative process. (PR, 91)

34. Eisner, Cognition and Curriculum Reconsidered, x.
35. Ibid.
36. Ibid.
37. Ibid., 19.
Hence, to the extent that we are healthy in this way, every deliberate act is creative and implicates the self — and were this not the case, it would not be possible to derive meaning from such acts. Whenever meaning is constructed, there is always a self-in-relation-to-world, and it is fruitful to take this into consideration as a prerequisite to Eisner’s discussion of representation. While Eisner has a great deal to tell us about the importance of providing students access to multiple forms of representation, I want to add that in doing so we are expanding on a foundation of self-in-relation-to-world and, thus, are allowing for an educational unfolding that is much deeper than we typically recognize.

Beyond being compatible with one another, the accounts of Winnicott and Eisner have a certain degree of overlap, as they both argue in support of the other’s basic position to some extent. Winnicott was deeply concerned about enabling the individual’s capacity for play and creativity to come to fruition. While his core focus was on the environmental conditions that support the capacity to experience transitional phenomena through the process of differentiation, he also recognized the critical need for individuals to be introduced to cultural elements at the appropriate point in their development so that they could exercise this capacity. Indeed, Winnicott identifies two needs that must be met in order for an individual’s capacity for play to come to fruition. The first involves the proper environmental conditions that support the process of differentiation, and the second is directly on point with Eisner’s approach: “The second need is for those who have care of children of all ages to be ready to put each child into touch with appropriate elements of the cultural heritage, according to the individual child’s capacity and emotional age and developmental phase” ([PR], 148). Eisner follows up on this point well in saying, “Without the ability to ‘read’ the special and unique meanings that different forms of representation make possible, their content will remain ... an untappable resource, an enigma that they cannot solve.”

And, indeed, there are a number of ways that Eisner makes points that speak to the foundation Winnicott provided in his notion of transitional phenomena and the role it plays in human life. In addition to mental doings, I believe Eisner is fundamentally concerned with what life is all about, and I think that he shares in Winnicott’s vision that it is cultural experience and the creation of meaning that makes life worth living. Eisner tells us that “work in the arts is not only a way of creating performances and products; it is a way of creating our lives by expanding our consciousness, shaping our dispositions, satisfying our quest for meaning, establishing contact with others, and sharing a culture” ([ACM], 3). Hence, although the major thrust behind Eisner’s argument rests in the mental doings of sensation, conception, and representation, there is a broader picture to which he is speaking and, indeed, a broader picture to consider in all discussions of aesthetic phenomena. Furthermore, this broader picture emerges through the process of differentiation; thus, while the arts do indeed contribute to the creation of mind, they are more fundamentally an act of self-in-relation-to-world.

Coda

At a fundamental level, all representations are concrete manifestations of interactions between self and world. Representations are embodied in material and made meaningful through the use of culture. Indeed, Winnicott tells us that it is culture that continues to hold us beyond the time of differentiation, extending the mothering environment through the use of transitional phenomena. Thus, culture — and this includes the forms of representation that Eisner concentrates on — is meaningful because culture provides the material and nonmaterial substance that we use to creatively fill in the potential space between self and world. Eisner describes the mechanisms through which this is achieved (that is, forms of representation), and Winnicott describes the meaning of it.

This discussion establishes that what constitutes meaningful experience is a self-in-relation-to-world and that the process through which this developmental achievement is realized has fundamental significance that persists throughout life in the form of aesthetic experience. This insight has bearing on the conception of aesthetic education itself, as it connects the doings of representation to a capacity for creativity and selfhood that is laid down in early life. Accordingly, through this analysis we see the emergence of a view of aesthetic education as an extension of the process of psychological differentiation. This deeper view of aesthetic education affords the insight that in addition to enabling students to have access to multiple forms of representation through which meaning is made, doing so generates the conditions for the continual refinement of self-in-relation-to-world. In this, aesthetic education touches the very core of our being and enacts the continual deepening and refinement of a process that provides meaning to life itself.

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