Play, Instrumentality and the Good Life

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1. Introduction

Young children are certainly involved in a variety of moral issues, and we might even say that they encounter them and experience them, but it is not clear that they perceive them *as* moral issues. In order to be able to encounter something as a moral issue, one must possess some moral vocabulary, be able to discriminate certain morally relevant aspects or alternatives, etc. Because of this, although young children are moral agents – as doers of morally good and bad acts – it is not clear that they are so except in a most trivial sense. In *Emile* Rousseau remarks: "The wisest men concentrate on what it is important for men to know without considering what children are in a condition to learn" (Rousseau, 1979, pp. 33-34). In this paper I will be concerned with what children are in a condition to learn, and with the conditions for their learning. More specifically, I will be concerned with the following three issues:

> How do children learn moral vocabulary?
> How can children do morally relevant experiments in living?
> What changes to children have for being the authors of the values they pursue in their activities?

I shall only provide a partial answer to these questions, arguing that play is of central importance for the moral development of children, not least very young children, by giving children an opportunity to (i) explore moral vocabulary, (ii) engage in various morally relevant activities and also (iii) select and act upon values and goals that are not dictated by others.

I believe that play has a deep educational relevance. By this I mean three things. First, play has a central role in developing moral character and living a meaningful life. Second, the knowledge and skills that are developed through play – or which play is particularly well suited for cultivating – are of general moral value and not simply of narrow instrumental value. Third, the educational value of play is not exhausted by an instrumental value of play as a useful tool in particular learning processes or educational settings.

Deep educational relevance can be contrasted with shallow educational relevance. Something has only *shallow* educational relevance if it is primarily of instrumental value in moral education and could be substituted by some other instrument – e.g. different kind of activity – without loss of educational quality. Although much has been written about the educational importance of play, a large part of it only serves to establish its shallow educational relevance. This is not to say that previous work has overlook play as an important or even a crucial part of various educational settings. Quite the contrary, many philosophers and educational theorists have argued convincingly

that play is of much educational value (Bennet, Wood and Rogers, 1997; van Oers and Duijkers, 2013). Thus, for instance, in his book *How we Think* Dewey remarks:

> A play and a story blend insensibly into each other. The most fanciful plays of children rarely lose all touch with the mutual fitness and pertinency of various meanings to one another; the "freest" plays observe some principles of coherence and unification. They have a beginning, middle, and end. In games, rules or order run thought various minor acts and bind them into a connected whole. The rhythm, the competition, and coöperation involved in most plays and games also introduce organization. There is, then, nothing mysterious or mystical in the discovery made by Plato and remade by Froebel that play is the chief, almost the only, mode of education for the child in the years of later infancy. (Dewey, 1997, p. 176)

Despite arguing convincingly that play is of great importance they do not relate play specifically to the development of moral character.

My arguments for the deep educational relevance of play draw primarily on ideas from diverse sources: Aristotelian ethics as interpreted by Kristján Kristjánsson, ideas of play inspired by Gadamer as interpreted by Monica Vilhauer and ideas about experience and education from Dewey. I will begin in section 2 by setting aside certain aspects of play which, although important in educational context, do not support the claim that play has deep educational relevance. I go on in section 3 to discuss some ideas of Csikszentmihalyi who has argued for the importance of play for the good life – one might say that he manages to show that play has deep relevance for the good life – his ideas do, however, not show that play has any deep educational relevance. Extending the ideas of Csikszentmihalyi into the realm of education, by drawing on recent work of Kristján Kristjánsson, I argue that play actually has deep educational relevance. This, however, does not exhaust the deep educational relevance of play as I argue in section 4 by drawing on Dewey's ideas on experience and education. I continue in section 5 to argue that play also provides important means of escape and transgression, drawing on ideas from Frederic Gros and bell hooks. Finally, in section 6, I use some ideas of Gadamer and Dewey on play and experience to complete my argument for the deep educational relevance of play.

2. Play as an instrument for learning

Play is often said to be central to learning, especially among young children. For this, two kinds of reasons are commonly given. On the one hand, play is associated with creativity and since learning is supposed to involve doing or obtaining something new, creativity is thought to be important for the process of learning. Second, play is thought to be an important means to learning, almost as if it was a method or collection of methods. Thus, many board games are thought to be a good way of learning math since they involve elementary math functions such as counting, adding and subtracting (Noddings, 2003, p. 243). Likewise, word games such as

Scrabble or games that involve story telling are thought to be good for literacy skills, as well as social skills and more. Moreover, playing with material things may help children develop fine movements and sensibility which is important for their physical and mental development. None of this, however, suffices to show that play has deep educational relevance since in these cases play has simply instrumental value for education and one may well imagine other methods working for the same ends.

I will begin by discussing the link between play and creativity. Teachers often talk about free play as opposed to organized play and what makes the former *free* is a lack of rules and external authority and, it is assumed, the constant need for creativity at any moment during the play. Creativity is also thought to be central to learning, not least in contemporary society which is said to be constantly changing. This is then said to indicate that education must emphasize *generic skills* rather than *fixed knowledge* and above all, it must emphasize flexibility and creativity.[1] However, this emphasis on flexibility and creativity may only offer instrumental support to play as an educational activity. Most people probably agree that one can learn various things through play, and that playing may be a fun way of learning and thus have various beneficial effects, such as less drop-out from school, less boredom, etc. Such arguments, however, only show that play has shallow educational relevance. Play may be a good way of reaching those goals, but not the only way nor perhaps the best; emphasis on generic skills and creativity has not resulted in more emphasis on play once kids are out of preschool. One might actually argue that, quite to the contrary, the emphasis on standardized testing and various general means to define and measure the quality and performance of educational institutions and systems has increased, both at national levels and internationally (PISA tests, Bologna process), and that these are antagonistic to play as either a means for learning or as an important element in educational settings of children and adolescents.

Moreover, the link between play and creativity is far from obvious since many plays or games are strictly rule bound so that the creativity called for in playing need not be different from the creativity that various highly structured and rule governed activities call for. Further, even in a free play, the participants often assume certain roles which, in turn, come with directions as to what they are supposed to do or achieve. Finally, many plays are so simple that they don't seem to make any *special* demands for creativity. Think, for instance, of crossing the street and not being allowed to step outside the white stripes or else some evil will befall you.

One may of course insist that even the simplest form of playing requires creativity. Seeing the white stripes at the cross walk as stepping stones across the abyss calls for a highly creative mind,

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[1] This is nothing new. Dewey talked about the need to educate students for an ever changing society before the turn of the 20th century and it has been a constant theme in all camps of education during the last century.

even if playing the game is rather simple. I agree, but I also agree with Wittgenstein that even following a rule requires a certain creativity at each step, and also that our ability to use language quite generally calls for linguistic creativity (Wittgenstein, 1974). My point is that there is nothing *obvious* about playing which sets such an activity apart from other more structured activities in this respect. The importance of play for creativity cannot simply be that playing requires creativity or makes room for creativity. Rather, if we want to argue for the deep educational relevance of play, we have to consider *how* it requires creative and what *kind* of creative is called for.

By these observations on the instrumentality of play for learning and on the link between playing and creativity I don't intend to undermine play as an important instrument for learning nor do I intend to downplay the relevance of play for creativity. My point is simply that pointing out instrumental value of play and linking play with creativity – both of which are important – fails to establish the deep educational relevance of play.

3. Play and the quality of life

Outside of educational literature, it has been argued that play has deep relevance for the good life. Csikszentmihalyi has, for instance, emphasized the autotelic character of play, i.e. that play is an activity that it is sought for its own sake (Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), and argued that as such play or play-like activities are an essential source of happiness. Csikszentmihalyi does not connect his account of play and flow to educational importance, in part perhaps because the educational importance is usually a value that lies outside the play and thus does not contribute to its autotelic character and the generation of flow experience. It is rather the other way around, in the cases where a play happens to have some educational character its autotelic character may contribute to or enhance its educational value. This, however, is not without qualification since some forms of plays are enjoyed because the participants develop certain skills by engaging in the activity; many of those who enjoy playing chess or climbing rocks, for instance, give "develop skills" as a reason for their enjoyment (Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, pp. 57–63). However, although some learning which is a result of the play may contribute to its autotelic character, the relevant skills (developed for instance in chess or rock climbing) are quite specific and closely tied to the activity itself. Those skills are usually not general moral skills that will have wide range of relevance. Thus, even if Csikszentmihalyi establishes the deep relevance of play for the good life, his arguments and observations do not substantiate the claim that play has a deep *educational* relevance.

In order to see the deep educational relevance of play, we must focus on certain educational aspects of playing rather than the flow-aspects as Csikszentmihalyi does. The educational aspects are not unrelated to the flow which Csikszentmihalyi considers but they are not the same. In play one can experience and practice many of the features that are constitutive of the good life in the Aristotelian sense. Here, two things are particularly important. First, in a play one may create a world

where values are not instrumental and derivative of things that lie outside the play. Second, play can be a mode of doing experiments in life with full seriousness.

The first point, the non-instrumentality of values in play, is what Csikszentmihalyi refers to as the autotelic character of play. Play activities of children may have all sorts of instrumental values but in the play – or during the play – such instrumental values are irrelevant. The activity of playing may create a world where values are not dictated by the adults but are generated within the play and depend on the nature of the different activities and roles that constitute the play. This is particularly relevant, since the lives of children are not only dominated by instrumental values but also by values that are dictated by others and whose relevance may be utterly obscure to the young child. In the play, the participants are able to carve out pockets of complete living where they can cultivate sensibility and attitudes that are central to leading a meaningful life.

This is all the more relevant since the idea of a completeness of an activity constituting good life does not align well with actual lives of children. Values in children's lives are by and large thought of in instrumental terms. Even organized leisure activities such as sports and various recreational activities are promoted for their instrumental value, mainly preventive value; if kids do sports they drink less and are less likely to smoke and use drugs. The domination of instrumentality also overshadows educational discourse. Activities at one level of schooling are geared towards predefined learning outcomes which are portrait as preparation for the next one, until one leaves the formal educational system for good.[2] Moreover, mention of non-instrumental moral values is rare even in educational discourse where it may seem to have a natural place. Here, recent surge in Aristotelian moral education has provided resistance:

> Aristotelianism has the distinct advantage of upholding a clearer view of the intrinsic value of virtuous traits of character [than current psychology inspired accounts of character education]: that those are constitutive of the good life rather than simply conducive to it. This neatly contradicts the currently dominant technicism and instrumentalism in education. (Kristjánsson, 2015, p. 26)

In play one can experience and practice many of the features that are central to the good life. In this respect, play and ethics are particularly tightly knit together; the attitude of play is central for the flourishing child. In this respect, play is not only of instrumental value but is constitutive of the good life i.e. flourishing.

[2] Elliot Eisner described this trend by saying that Dewey lost while Thorndike won: "Except for some independent schools, Thorndike won and Dewey lost. Metaphorically speaking, schools were to become effective and efficient manufacturing plants. Indeed, the language of manufacture was a part of the active vocabulary of Thorndike, Taylor, Cubberly and others in the social efficiency movement. In their vision of education, students were raw material to be processed according to specifications prescribed by supervisors trained in Fredrick Taylor's time an motion study" (Eisner, 2005, p. 206).

> Flourishing constitutes an ongoing activity, and such an activity comprises, most crucially, the realisation of specifically human excellences. We call those excellences virtues, and they are typically considered *necessary* conditions of flourishing. (Kristjánsson, 2015, p. 14)

Central to the Aristotelian outlook is the idea of a completeness of an activity which is particularly relevant when discussing children and their development from infancy into adulthood. The phrase 'flourishing child' neither denotes an end-stage nor a successful completion of a preparatory stage or stages (as the Kohlbergian moral stages are (Kohlberg, 1981)), but refers to a constitutive part of the life of the flourishing person (Kristjánsson, 2015). One thing that is central to a flourishing human being – whether a child or an adult – is completeness of some of the activities that constitute that person's life. The goodness of the good life is not to be found in external things – neither in afterlife nor in the lives of others, though both are, in a way, central to the good life; the goodness is internal to the activities that constitute the life itself.

One might criticise the idea of the flourishing child by pointing out that the Aristotelian conception of flourishing does not apply to a particular stage in the life of a person but to her life as a whole. Therefore, the critic might insist, there is no more sense in talking about flourishing child than, say, about the flourishing middle aged man, or the flourishing teenager. This criticism is well taken, but the phras 'the flourishing child' is not meant to apply to the child as a complete being but rather to the child as a being that is also constantly becoming, i.e. not a complete actuality in the Aristotelian sense but an actuality that is at the same time potentiality for a more complete form of being. Thus, Kristjánsson explains:

> A term such as 'the flourishing child' must thus not be understood as referring to a child who has achieved flourishing but to a child who is successfully on the way to leading a good life. *Eudaimonia* is no a passive end-state, however; rather it is an activity of our psyche that embodies reason through the medium of reason-infused virtues. (Kristjánsson, 2015, p. 25)

Another criticism of the idea of completeness of an activity of children, whether a play such as role-play or something else, is that such playing relies on various external circumstances – the life of adults and the life to come – for the play to make any sense at all. Thus, a play as a source of value is never independent of things outside the play. This is most obvious in the role play of young children where they replicate the roles they observe in adult lives. However, although quite correct, this does not undermine the idea of a completeness of an activity, for an activity may rely on circumstances outside the activity itself for its value-ladenness, without the values being instrumental. This is argued in a different context by Samuel Scheffler in his book, *Death and the Afterlife* (2013).

> I have argued that the survival of people after our deaths matters greatly to us ... because it is a condition of many other things that now matter to us continuing to do so. In some very significant respects, we actually care more about the survival of others after our deaths than

> we do about the existence of a personal afterlife, and the imminent disappearance of the human race would have a more corrosive effect on our ability to lead ... 'value-laden lives' than does the actual prospect of our own death ... In this respect ... the survival of humanity matters more to each of us ... even than our own survival. (Scheffler, 2013, pp. 80-81).

One might find it contradictory to say that the value of the good life does not reside in external things and, at the same time, find the lives of others and our afterlife, in Scheffler's sense, so important. However, I don't think there is any contradiction here. To see this, notice how, for instance, a play may be a source of value – something is valuable and valued in the play for reasons intrinsic to the play itself – and yet the play as such may rely on various external sources to ground its value-conferring property. Kids who play role plays in the kindergarten – they invite guests for coffee, bake cakes and serve them attentively – still rely on comparable roles in the real world for this kind of play to make sense and be a source of value. But still, things being valued in the play do not rely on any instrumental relevance for things outside the play.

The values that a child experiences in a play are not instrumental and derivative of future activities or states of living but are intrinsic to the play itself. The activity of playing may create a world where values are not dictated by the adults but are generated within the play and depend on the nature of the different activities and roles that constitute the play. This last point is particularly relevant, since the lives of children are not only dominated by instrumental values but also by values that are dictated by others and whose relevance may be utterly obscure to the young child. In play the participants are able to carve out pockets of complete living where they can cultivate sensibility and attitudes that are central to leading a meaningful life.

4. Playing as experiment in living

John Dewey famously claimed that all education came about through experience (Dewey, 1998). It isn't clear what exactly he meant by this, though one can be sure that he did not intend this to be a trivial thesis. In *Experience and Education*, where he discusses the matter at some length, he remarks:

> It is not enough to insist upon the necessity of experience, not even of activity in experience. Everything depends upon the quality of the experience which is had. The quality of any experience has two aspects. There is an immediate aspect of agreeableness or disagreeableness, and there is its influence upon later experiences. (Dewey, 1998, p. 16)

In the long quote from Dewey at the beginning of this paper, he says: "The most fanciful plays of children rarely lose all touch with the mutual fitness and pertinency of various meanings to one another." The relevance of this for children's learning and development – not least moral development – is I crucial if we look at education as born out of experience. In order to become a moral agent one must possess some moral concepts. But how does one come to possess moral concepts? Or how does one learn to use moral vocabulary? Moral vocabulary resists any simple definition and it is not possible to clarify things by ostension. In order to build up such a vocabulary, it is important that children be able to bring its meaning somehow within the boundaries of their own experience, for instance by applying it in a variety of circumstances and

discussing its meaning. Part of the this work is carried out in day to day interactions, sweet and sour, and here play is essential. For young children playing offers a space for building up a world of meanings by offering the rich circumstances necessary for meaning-making and meaning-exploration to take place. When young children play role plays, whether they are queens and kings, or they are playing the more mundane roles of parents and children, patients and doctors, etc. they are, at the same time, doing experiments in conceptualization. Of course, terms such as 'king' and 'queen' may be defined with reference to the fairy tales of kings and queens which are read to children from an early age. But what about terms such as 'power' and 'care' or, say, 'exclusion' and 'inclusion'. For learning such concepts no story will suffice. If the child has not felt the emotions involved in being accepted as one of the group, and the very different emotions felt by being excluded, the stories of inclusion or exclusion will make little sense. These terms refer to rather abstract ideas and may be difficult to grasp without a chance to experiment with them. It is hard to understand what exclusion means, or what is wrong with exclusion, without a chance to act out instances of inclusion and exclusion, feel the emotions that such circumstances generate, etc.

This point can be rephrased with the help of Wittgenstein who argued that without use, a symbol is just a dead letter. What are the possibilities of use in the case of young children? Well, playing provides contexts in which children can take on different roles and apply different vocabulary. Once in a play, the children have an opportunity to tray out the concepts that define the circumstances of the play, whether they come from fairy tales or ordinary life, and thus give them practical relevance. This is, I think, what Dewey had in mind when he said that there is nothing mysterious in the discovery of Plato and Froebel that play was almost the only mode of education for the child in the years of later infancy.

Dewey was concerned with theories of learning rather than morality, and his observation concerns play as means to develop and comprehend meaning and master complex circumstance. This has obvious moral or ethical importance as the meanings and circumstances in question often are morally relevant. However, in this sense, the *moral* importance of play derives from its educational relevance and is exhausted by it. Thus, we have an argument to the effect that play has deep educational relevance whether or not it has deep moral relevance. As a means to master concepts and develop sensibility, play is of central *instrumental* importance for moral education.

We can, however, extend the above argument to support the claim that play has also deep *moral* relevance. The point is that in order to master moral concepts and develop moral character traits, children must be able to participate in circumstances where the relevant concepts and character traits are, so to speak, put to the test. In other words, children must be offered ways of doing experiments in life with full seriousness. In general, people don't have many options of doing such experiments. In ordinary life people cannot lie, break promises, be rude, distrustful etc. without grave consequences.

I only know of two ways of going through episodes involving morally pregnant situations, such as those involving grave injustice or intense need of care, without grave permanent consequences; the arts and play. Good literature offers possibilities of going through all the emotional turmoil that belongs to grim moral circumstances and yet, at the end of the book, the film or the stage play, one can put it aside without any of those horrible things having taken place (Carr and Harrison, 2015). Playing, likewise, offers children means of experimenting with roles that have various moral importance without risking permanent real life consequences. Playing involves all sorts of make-believes and allows the participants to experiment with circumstances and concepts that they may not be able to work with outside a play situation. At the same time, once in the play, the make-believes must be taken with full seriousness. Very young children take care of their dolls or teddy bears long before they can be trusted to take care of any living being. But in the absence of such opportunities, it is doubtful that they could master such concept and develop those character traits that revolve around care.

> Though the game, of which the player is just a part, may surpass him or subsume him, taking priority over his individual role, it remains essential to the existence of the game that the player actively conducts himself in his playing in such a way that he, with full seriousness and involvement, attends wholeheartedly to the task required of him. (Vilhauer, 2010, location 988 of 4478)

To highlight the importance of play in this respect it is useful to look at Kohlberg's ideas of moral pedagogy. I don't intend to take issues with his structuralism nor with his characterization of the six moral stages through which a normal person may pass in his or her life. The point I want to make is simply this. When Kohlberg explains *how* one moves from one stage to another, he opts for what we might call Socratic pedagogy:

> … the teaching of virtue is asking of questions and the pointing of the way, not giving of answers. Moral education is the leading of people upward, not the putting into the mind of knowledge that was not there before. (Kohlberg, 1981, p. 30)

I am all for asking questions, but the method must take a different form when one is working with children as young as 2 to 4 years old, from when one is working with adults or, as Socrates commonly did, with the elderly who were especially experienced in the quarters of life under investigation. What questions will be asked? What vocabulary is acceptable? To what experiences can one refer? An Aristotelian would also ask about the emotional aspect of the teaching and learning since. For the typical Socratic pedagogy to work the participants must already possess moral vocabulary and have rich moral experience to draw from. With young children the issue is how this vocabulary develops and where the children might gain morally relevant experience.

5. The importance of escape

One challenge that people meet today – not least young people – is that they are pressured into playing fairly determined roles, both in their public and private lives. Space for self-realization, or for development of self-concept, are very limited. The French philosopher Frédéric Gros describes this in an insightful way while discussing the simple freedoms one may gain from walking.

> What I mean is that by walking you are not going to meet yourself. By walking, you escape from the very idea of identity, the temptation to be someone, to have a name and a history. Being someone is all very well for smart parties where everyone is telling their story, it's all very well for psychologists' consulting rooms. But isn't being someone also a social obligation which trails in its wake – for one has to be faithful to the self-portrait – a stupid and burdensome fiction. The freedom in walking lies in not being anyone; for the walking body has no history, it is just an eddy in the stream of immemorial life. (Gros, 2015, pp. 6–7).

Generally speaking, experiments in living are not welcome, both because of peer pressure and because of fashion and dominant ideology. Recent trends in technology are not very helpful here; young people live increasingly through the lenses of others, who in turn live through the lenses of yet others. This phenomenon is nothing new, but the circumstances in which it takes place have changed dramatically in the last few decades.

Young people are under immense pressure to conform to strong norms, they spend years after years in schools where authority is firmly embedded in books and concrete or tied to position and merit where they are the least advantaged. They come under increased pressure to perform, where their humanity is reduced to predefined skills and conformity. In this climate of determinacy of identity, playing is dually important. On the one hand, it may provide a rare opportunity to to take on different roles, whether in a role play of children in preschool or in playing football after school with a bunch of friends. On the other hand, the attitude of playing may open up spaces, not least educational spaces, where children can challenge the dominant ideology, whether of their home or the entire society. The American author, feminist, educationist and social activist bell hooks describes an instance of the latter in her book *Teaching to Transgress*:

> School was the place of ecstasy – pleasure and danger. To be changed by ideas was pure pleasure. But to learn ideas that ran counter to values and beliefs learned at home was to place oneself at risk, to enter the danger zone. Home was the place where I was forced to conform to someone else's image of who and what I would be. School was the place where I would forget that self and, through ideas, reinvent myself. (hooks, 1994, p. 3)

When bell hooks describes her early education as a place for transgression, where she could cross the cultural and disciplinary boundaries of her home to be changed by ideas learned at school, she is describing a school where she could play herself out, as Gadamer puts it.

> The self-presentation of human play depends on the player's conduct being tied to the make-believe goals of the game, but the "meaning" of these goals does not in fact depend on their being achieved. Rather, in spending oneself on the task of the game, one is in fact playing oneself out. The self-

> presentation of the game involves the player's achieving, as it were, his own self-presentation by playing – i.e., presenting – something. (Gadamer, 2004, p. 112)

The kind of learning community that bell hooks describes at the beginning of *Teaching to Transgress* is one in which education becomes the practice of freedom, i.e. where one can experiment with different identities by playing oneself out, to use Gadamer's phrase, in various ways.

6. Gadamer and Dewey on play and experience

A school that educates for transgression in the sense of bell hooks, is a place where one can practice freedom for the purpose of self-transformation. It is a place which does not necessarily operate according to predefined categories or rules, but where both are negotiated along the way. Or, to use the phrasing of Eisner, it is a school in which Dewey has won and Thorndyke lost. This picture of the school sits well with Gadamers idea of play as interpreted by Monica Vilhauer in the following quote:

> Human play, then, has the special quality of human freedom, which is not simply the freedom of variability, or the freedom of caprice; but it is a freedom that involves the intentional self-restraint that goes along with any effort to accomplish something, do something, play something. (Vilhauer, 2010, p. 34)

What happens in play is that the children are, in a way, authors of their own destiny. They choose the tasks and they can try to accomplish things that are, in the play, relevant, even important. And there is no outside authority which can determine whether they succeed or whether the tasks in question are important or trivial. The idea of "playing oneself out" is of central importance here. What bell hooks experienced at home was not playing herself out but rather, acting according to the norms and values of others. Gadamer refers to the play as an escape as Vilhauer remarks:

> [In a play] we get a first sense that our being-present or being-here is intimately wrapped up with being-a-participant inside some world, some community with others in which we attend to the presentation of something beyond ourselves, that is, the subject matter of our worldly experience. (Vilhauer, 2010, p. 35)

Thus, when we lack the quality of being present – as when our mentality is caught up in future bound instrumentality – we lose the ability to be participants in our own lives. What the play provides is a setting where one can be wholly present while, at the same time, presenting the subject matter of the play.

Lets now connect this with Dewey's idea of experience and education. Gadamer distinguishes between two meanings of the word 'experience' or actually between the meanings of the German words 'Erlebnis' and 'Erfahrung', both of which would translate as 'experience' in English (Gadamer, 2013, p. 88). It can mean two things:

> (1) the immediate, first-person, lived feeling that precedes interpretation or communication (a kind of material to be shaped) and
>
> (2) the lasting significance that results from this "flow" of feeling, which we are likely to call "an experience". (Vilhauer, 2010, p.9)

This distinction is similar to one Dewey makes in *Democracy and Education*, where he compares the ancient Greek understanding of experience and the understanding which became dominant among philosophers in the modern age.

> To Plato experience meant habituation, or the conservation of the net product of a lot of past chance trials. Reason meant the principle of reform, of progress, of increase of control. Devotion to the cause of reason meant breaking through the limitations of custom and getting at things as they really were. To the modern reformers, the situation was the other way around. Reason, universal principles, a priori notions, meant either blank forms which had to be filled in by experience, by sense observations, in order to get significance and validity; or else were mere indurated prejudices, dogmas imposed by authority, which masqueraded and found protection under august names. (Dewey, 2007, p. 197)

The latter understanding of experience that Gadamer refers to (Erfahrung) corresponds more or less to the ancient understanding of experience, as Dewey describes it, while Gadamer's first understanding of experience (Erlebnis) corresponds to the ideas of the modern reformers.

I shall not dwell on linguistic issues, but go back to Dewey's description of Plato's understanding as noted above: "To Plato experience meant habituation, or the conservation of the net product of a lot of past chance trials". If we accept Dewey's outlook here, the question of how children can come of age as moral beings boils down to the question of where they get the opportunity to gain experience through a lot of past chance trials. In trivial matters it may be easy to gain experience from chance trials. That is how kids learn to ride a bike, or avoid conflicts in the family, or prepare their own breakfast etc. But in cases where the stakes are high and of moral importance, one does not easily engage in chance trials. One does not cheat on a friend, or hurt someone, or steal, etc. just to see how that might turn out. Moreover, coming of age as a moral being is not just about learning some skills and some facts, it is also about developing as an emotional being who is capable of loving lovable things, be compassionate when that is relevant, get angry at things that should make one angry, etc. In short, it involves cultivating various virtues in the Aristotelian sense.

7. Concluding remarks

Rooth Woods begins her excellent book *Children's Moral Lives* with the question: What moral issues do children encounter when they are not with adults, and how do they respond to them? Woods describes an ethnographic research she did in one primary school in order to answer the question – or rather the more general question: How are Western children's moral experiences influenced by the culture they are growing up in? (Woods, 2013, p. 5). It is typical of many of the episodes which Woods describes that they are given moral relevance without much difficulty, even if the adults sometimes perceive them and interpret differently from the way the kids do. Moreover, when asked about what happened the kids seem to be well capable of discussing those episodes and are quite articulate, not only concerning the factual circumstances but also when reflecting on their moral aspects. Reading descriptions such as those of Woods, one might ask: How did the kids become so articulate? Where did they learn to use moral vocabulary in this way? And why do they talk about the moral relevance of those episodes they way they do, even

when not being accountable to any adults? Those latter questions are not addressed by Woods, but are the kind of questions that I have been discussing. While Woods gives us a valuable insight into the moral lives of children, I have been wondering how they became moral in the first place. I have only looked at one part of this complicated story, the relevance of children's play, but a part that I believe is very important.

The deep educational relevance of play derives from various aspects of play and the lives of children: In play children can get out of the instrumentality that dominates their lives, whether in or out of school. They can also set up circumstances that are fictional and where consequences are limited to a certain space and time, and yet the activities are of utter seriousness. Children can also experiment with circumstances in which they have no way of engaging in daily life, sometimes by entering into relations and take up roles that they may not have access to outside the play situation. For children, then, play is the great laboratory of life where not only meaning is explored but also where virtue and character can be developed. Adolescents and adults may use literature to go beyond the actual circumstances of their lives (Carr and Harrison, 2015), but young children must rely on play for such adventures. But play offers also ways of developing as a moral being that are less obvious and often overlooked by educators. In play a child may play with the limits of possible self-realization, which will both involve inward-looking attitudes and emotions (e.g. pride and self-respect) as well as social attitudes and emotions (e.g. compassion and justice), and where the limits of acceptable forms of self-realization might be transgressed as bell hooks described in her book *Teaching to Transgress*. There, the process of education is itself becomes a playful process where the subject matter of the play is the person herself.

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