

## Life As A Game And Stage Performance-(Role-Playing)

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As a rule, we live life more or less as it comes. Yet the business of living is in reality an art and should be the greatest of all the arts.

Every art has its specific techniques; likewise the art of living has its own techniques, and mastering them is indispensable in practicing it successfully. One such technique is to consider life as a game and stage performance. To deal with play is not easy. The concept of play is complex, many-faceted and elusive to the extent that it could be said to play hide-and-seek with whoever tries to pin it down and define it. Huizinga, in his book, *Homo Ludens* (Gallimard, Paris, 1951) lists a number of views held by various writers on the subject. Thus, play has been considered:

1. A means of discharging an excess of vitality;
2. A way of meeting the need for relaxation;
3. A training in preparation for some serious activity;
4. A means for developing self control;
5. A medium for dominating others;
6. An outlet for the drive to compete;
7. A harmless method of discharging harmful tendencies;
8. A compensatory activity;
9. A fictitious and imaginary substitute for the gratification of unattainable desires.

Each of the above views emphasizes an aspect of games, but each is partial, and this fact calls for a preliminary observation: The *functions* of a game are to be distinguished from its *nature*. In fact, the same activity is or is not a “game” according to the *psychological attitude*, the *intention*, the *purpose* that motivates the “player.” Sport offers a clear example of this. Etymologically considered, and in its pure nature and original meaning, sport is play, *ludus*, something done for diversion. But nowadays many people go in for sport in an increasingly “serious” way, and for motives such as ambition or financial reward, which are inconsistent with its intrinsic nature. It thus loses the quality of play and takes on the character of work. When it becomes a profession, sport is no longer truly sport. In reality there is no clear dividing line between “play” and “non-play,” or more precisely that, in any ostensibly playful activity, the proportion of what is play and what is “serious” (in the strict sense of the word) is a variable. Indeed it can change during the course of the activity itself. This is brought out clearly in the case of children who, beginning to fight in fun, get angry and come to blows in earnest. Gambling provides a striking example in which the high proportion of the seriousness tends to minimize the game element. Where the urge to gamble has become an overwhelming, obsessive passion, the “play” aspect disappears.

A true, sporting attitude aims at “playing well” rather than at winning. They are two different things: winning can depend upon a number of contingent factors such as an opponent's inferior skill or favourable conditions of some kind or another. The same applies to losing. The genuine

sportsman is not bent on winning at the expense of style, good form and fair play. And, as in other fields of human endeavour, freedom from worry whether one wins or not can contribute to victory!

Much more could be added on the subject of games-playing and its functions in education, psychotherapy and psychosynthesis, but I shall confine myself to discussing one particular aspect of play, interpreted in its widest sense, that is, as a *performance*, or *acting*. Play and acting have both affinities and differences. One affinity is indicated by the fact that several languages, besides English, use a word that stands for to play, as well as to act in a theatrical production. The French *jouer* and the German *spielen* are examples. The differences will appear as the exposition proceeds.

To act a part or role in life, in fact several ones, constitutes a psychosynthetic technique of fundamental importance. It can indeed be considered as the pivotal technique of the art of living, with which all the others are linked and on which, in a certain sense, they are dependent. At first, this claim might occasion surprise and even be thought as shocking, as too frivolous an attitude. Yet dispassionate observation of ourselves and others, unclouded by preconceptions and illusions, reveals indeed forces upon us the recognition—that every one of us performs, or “acts” a variety of “parts” in life. This is inevitable, and such roles constitute the “plot” of our interpersonal and social relations. But most of the time we act our parts unconsciously without being aware of them and we perform them poorly, unskillfully, like bad amateur actors. Among primitive peoples and in ancient civilizations, play and theatrical performances had a sacred character and were re\_garded as the way in which the Gods acted. In continuance of this tradition, the Passion Play of the Middle Ages has survived until today in some places, such as Oberammergau, while other towns have re\_vived it, as has Grassano, near Florence. The history of this sacred character of “performing” is abundantly documented in Huizinga's book.

Also, Wagner conferred a profound significance and spiritual pur\_ose on the musical theatre. He styled some of his musical dramas “Buhnenweihespiele,” that is, sacred (or consecrated) and joyous performances.

The conception of life as a stage performance is an ancient and widespread one. While this is not the occasion to trace its historical background, one or two points about it have a special relevance in this context. The cosmic manifestation itself has been seen as a game, a performance, a divine dance. Thus, the “Dance of Shiva” appears frequently in sculptures in Indian temples. The Bible, a work of great solemnity, contains the passage: “Deus ludit in orbe terrarum.”

A sonnet of the philosopher Tommaso Campanella is in similar vein. Here are its beginning and end:

“In the theatre of the world, our souls play a masquerade,  
Hiding themselves behind their bodies and their effects.”

“When at the end we render up our masks to earth and sky and sea,  
In God we shall discern who did and said the better thing.”

The modern Russian writer and dramatist, Nicholas Evreinoff, has emphasized this aspect of life in his book, *The Theatre of Life*, in which he dwells at length on what he terms the “theatrical instinct.” In addressing himself to “My God Playwright,” he says:

“My face and body are but masks and costume with which the Heavenly Father has clothed my Ego before ushering it upon the stage of this world, where it is destined to

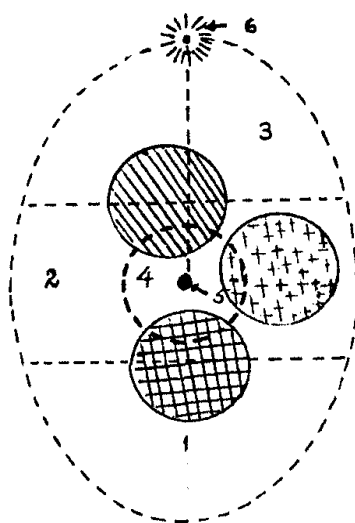
play a given part. This rime, the part entrusted to me by my cosmic Producer, Playwright, is a difficult one. Yet, I shall neither neglect my duty nor complain. As befits a noble and therefore a loyal actor, I shall summon all my forces and play my part upon this stage as best as I can. And I am sure that the Playwright will not fail to reward my efforts.”

In several of his plays Pirandello has exploited this theme, but his approach is pessimistic. He features the fictitious, illusory and dramatic aspects of the interplay between roles. Hermann Keyserling, on the contrary, in the twelfth of his *South American Meditations*, significantly entitled “Divine Comedy,” has interpreted more profoundly than any other author the relations between game, performance and real life.<sup>1</sup>

As a technique of Psychosynthesis, the art of acting in life is founded on the psychological structure of the human being. This is described in my book, *Psychosynthesis*.<sup>2</sup>

The production of a play in the theatre requires contributions from three principal agents and their mutual collaboration: the *author*, the *director* and the *actors*. In the case of the “play” which each one of us has to perform on the stage of life, the author is, or should be, the Higher or Transpersonal Self. He selects the theme, the task or-better-the play the personality is to undertake and the parts it should “impersonate.” It is to be noted that as a rule this takes place without any clear awareness on the part of the ego, or “I,” since the Transpersonal Self operates from the level of the superconscious. The conscious “I,” the center of consciousness, is the *director*. His function is to *carry out* the life plan, which is revealed to the “I” by degrees, through inspiration, inner promptings and the unfolding of life's circumstances. The success of the production depends in large measure on the director, on his grasp of the play's plot and situations, on his acceptance of them and on the care and skill with which he directs his cast. Who are these actors? They are the various sub-personalities created by each and every human being during the course of his life.

In the diagram below, three sub-personalities are depicted. The central circle represents the area of the conscious “I,” into which a part of each sub-personality penetrates, while its greater part operates on one of the unconscious levels.



1. Lower unconscious
2. Middle unconscious
3. Superconscious
4. Field of consciousness
5. The personal self or I (ego)
6. The transpersonal Self

It should be observed, however, that the respective areas of the unconscious depicted as occupied are not fixed in extent, each sub-personality being able to “rise” or “descend” during the activity in which it is engaged. Moreover, each level accommodates not only one sub-personality (as shown in the diagram for the sake of clarity) but a variety of them.

Each sub-personality performs its specific function; that is to say, it plays its own “part” in family and social life. The family creates the “parts” of son or daughter, of husband or wife, of father or mother. In the milieu of society the “parts” correspond to a person's occupation or professional role, to the various public capacities in which he may serve.

Expanding the theatrical analogy, let us examine first of all the *author-director* relationship, i.e. the rapport between the Transpersonal Self and the conscious “I.” These relations are very varied. Unfortunately, until a certain stage in the development of the individual is reached, this relationship is usually warped by lack of understanding, misinterpretations, resistance and conflicts of the part of the “I.” This stage gradually can give place to the recognition by the conscious “I” that it is in its own interest to understand the “Author's” intention, to put himself in accord with the Self and to cooperate with Him.

Then there are the relations between *director and actors*. The success of the “production” depends upon the director's ability and authority in carrying out his specific responsibilities: training the actors how best to interpret their parts, plotting their interactions, etc. In terms of life, this corresponds to the work of the conscious “I” in developing, training and harmonizing its various sub-personalities so that they learn the art of cooperating with one another.

Then come the “rehearsals.” They correspond to the “imaginative training” that should be undergone prior to performing any “part” in life. Such “rehearsals” have a function akin to that of play as a preparation for life; this is a method that should be employed much more and especially so in family and school education.

From a somewhat different angle, one of the most important and illuminating aspects of the analogy between acting and life concerns the relations between the *personality of the actor*, as a human being, man or woman, and the *characters* he sequentially “impersonates,” his “mask” in a psychological sense. This brings up an important and much discussed question. How far should an actor identify himself with the character he is playing? Or should he keep himself psychologically that is, emotionally-detached from the part so as to enable him to apply his full technical resources to the control of his interpretation? Which method makes for the best actor?

Diderot aroused lively discussions about this question with the position he took in his book, *The Paradox of the Comedian*. He maintained that “extreme sensitivity (in an emotional sense) makes for a mediocre actor, while its total absence contributes to making a sublime one.” Dogmatically expressed like that, it has incurred much criticism, and has formed the subject of scientific research. Among various investigators, Professors Marzi and Vignoli addressed a questionnaire to eighteen prominent Italian actors, and published the results of their survey in an article, *The Expression of the Emotions on the Stage*.<sup>3</sup> These indicated that the extent to which actors involved themselves in the emotional content of the characters they play varies widely. Some of them replied that they experience a partial identification with the character. According to Renzo Ricci, the emotion that an actor feels on the stage is relatively similar to the real emotions, with their psychosomatic reactions. He states that:

“After preparing himself, the actor is *in* the character, or the character is in him. The fusion is not complete however ... until the most dramatic moments, in which the actor does abandon himself completely to the role of the character.”

Others declared that during their performances they maintain an attitude of observation and criticism, and a clear awareness of themselves. Anno Proclemer indeed goes further in saying:

“The actor must feel the character, but not during the performance, when a control must be established that precludes any surrender to emotion.”

A few, like Ruggero Ruggeri and Elena da Venezia, speak of a split and- Anna Torrieri's observation carries particular significance in this connection:

“Always to control oneself in any of life's emergencies, to habituate oneself to II continuous control, leads to control in the theatre becoming habitual, when the part will be lived with the balance and self-control that characterize real life.”

It would be more realistic to say “should characterize!”

Thus, these actors keep their individual self-conscious awareness distinct, albeit in various degrees, from the parts they play in the theatre. By means of the ability to preserve a state of self-observation and self-control, they establish a dichotomy between the part of them that observes and directs and the one which acts, and thus achieve a disidentification. Their statements are significant because they are spontaneous and represent the fruit of personal experience rather than opinions garnered from technical psychological research.

Let us now examine how all this may be applied to the functions we perform in life, and what conclusions we may draw from it. In this sphere too we may observe that the degrees of identification of “actor” with “part” vary widely. In general, one “lives” one's roles “instinctively” (employing the word in the usual and not the scientific sense), that is to say at the behest of inner impulses or by reactions or responses to external stimuli and conditioning. This fact provides the basis for the psychological conceptions which regard human beings as activated by needs, drives and conditioned reflexes. These conceptions, in which the behaviourist and reflexological theories are rooted, are extremely one-sided in that they take account only of what is least “human” in man's make up. Yet they must be given the credit for having thrown light on this aspect of human nature, and by making us aware of it, helping us-intentionally or even unintentionally-to cope with it.

It is true that the vast majority of men and women allow themselves to be so controlled by their “parts,” and often are so carried away by them, that they have virtually no autonomous, genuine, self-conscious life apart from them. Typical examples are to be seen in those women who identify themselves entirely with their maternal function, and in those men who feel they are truly themselves and important only when exercising their function as commanding officer, magistrate, managing director, and so forth. There are also those who identify themselves with their possessions. A French landowner went so far as to say: “I am my land!”

Important reasons exist, however, for not identifying ourselves too closely with a single part or a single function. If we restrict ourselves to one role, totally committing ourselves to it and concentrating all our interest in it, we severely limit our capacity to attend adequately to other functions which we must perform as well. The public official, the professional man who devotes all his forces to his work will have little time and energy left to attend properly to his function as husband or father. Similarly, the woman who identifies herself wholly with her maternal function will not be able to properly fulfill her role as wife, and will risk the atrophying of her potentialities for experience and expression as a human being in the social milieu. Furthermore, when the performance of the function to which a person has devoted himself almost exclusively is made impossible by force of circumstances (illness, age, loss or separation from marriage partner or children) a serious crisis may ensue, a collapse leading to psychosomatic illness or even suicide. In contrast, a person who has acquired skill in distributing his vital interests, inner attention and energies among the parts which life has called upon him to play, and which he has voluntarily accepted, will be in a position to find compensations and in some cases even to make active use of talents and undertake activities that up to now he has neglected or had to put on one side.

On the other hand, there are those people who maintain constant self-observation during their activities, and subject themselves to frequent self-criticism. Some indeed practice this to excess, thereby allowing their self-analysis and criticism to inhibit or even paralyze action. These are among the extreme introverts.

There are also those who consciously play a part for utilitarian purposes, for deceiving and exploiting or for amusement. But this should not encourage the belief that an instinctive way of living is the only genuine one, and every conscious "performance" a sham. This false notion might be termed the "fallacy of misconceived sincerity," since it equates sincerity with uncontrolled impulsiveness.

There is instead a manner of "acting" in life which is not only as genuine and real, but is so in a higher way, and which at times may constitute a duty.

In a general way the difference between the two styles of life can be compared to the difference between nature and art. One style is living "naturally," according to the dictates of instinct, the other exercising the *art of living*, or "living as art." The right relationship between the two ways is synthetically expressed in the saying: "Art is based on nature, but improves it." From another point of view it may be said that the genuine, and therefore the human, ethical and spiritual value of our conduct lies in the *intention* which animates it, in the goal towards which it is directed, and finally in the *wisdom and technical skill* which informs our actions.

Let us now apply what has been said to describing the method which can guide one in giving a good "performance" of his or her "part" on the world stage. The essential step consists in our getting acquainted with our true being, with our Self, with what we *really* are. But in order to achieve this, we have to make a voyage of discovery in order to ascertain the various elements that comprise our personality, to become acquainted with the "anatomy" and "psychology" of our psychological structure. This is the real meaning of the age-old but always topical injunction: "Know thyself." Its accomplishment demands the disidentification of ourselves from the many contents of our psyche and from our various sub-personalities. This enables us to recognize ourself as pure "self-conscious and permanent identity": both the personal (self-awareness) and transpersonal, or spiritual Self.

There is an exercise, *The Exercise of Disidentification and Self identification*, which is of much help in cultivating this attitude of "detached observer."<sup>4</sup>

The second phase is that in which the existing sub-personalities are transformed and trained by the "director." It is to this stage that the two other "passwords" adopted by psychosynthesis refer: *Possess thyself* and *Transform thyself*. All psychosynthetic techniques have this as their goal.

But what, one may ask, is the degree—the percentage, so to speak of *partial* identification during action? This varies widely according to the *kind* of action and the *psychological type* of the person concerned; but in every case an optimal proportion exists and can be found and adopted. A general rule to apply when a new function or skill is being developed is to devote the maximum attention to it at the outset, learning it and performing it to the best of one's ability. Practice progressively reduces the need for attending closely to its performance, as control of it is gradually taken over by the unconscious, while the quality of performance improves, with less and less emotional involvement. This is analogous to the way in which actors, becoming increasingly familiar with their role in a play, can afford to decrease their personal involvement in it. There is also an effective method, analogous to the rehearsals of a play, which consists in preparatory action by means of the exercise in "Imaginative Training."<sup>5</sup>

The use of any these methods, however, presupposes a clear and stable *self-consciousness*, the employment of a *firm and decisive will*, and a constant sense of *self-awareness*, both as subject and, at the same time, as *agent*. This attitude can be taken at the level of the personal "I," the ego, but

the most effective way is to establish contact and a relationship with the Transpersonal Self, of which the personal "I" is an emanation, or reflection. From this higher Reality, we can constantly draw light and strength needed for resisting every inner and external attraction, every enticement and inducement which seek to divert us from our task: to give the best performance we are capable of in playing the part allotted to us, or chosen by us, in the great human drama.

1. Hermann Keyserling-*Meditations Sud-Americaines*-Paris: Stock, 1932.
2. *Psychosynthesis, A Manual of Principles and Techniques*-New York: Hobbs, Dorman, 1965. Paper back Edition-N.Y.: Viking Press, 1971.
3. Published in the "*Rivista di Psicologia*"-1944.1945
4. It is described in my book "Psychosynthesis: A Manual of Principles and Techniques"-Chapter IV, page 116.
5. Ibid, page 157.