In this book, David P. Levine applies psychoanalytic object relations theory to understanding work motivation and the meaning of work. Drawing on the writings of authors such as Donald Winnicott, Otto Kernberg and Melanie Klein, he explores three factors central to our effort to understand work: guilt, greed and the self. Special attention is paid to the factors that determine the individual’s emotional capacity to do work that engages the self and its creative potential and to the related matter of impairment in that capacity. Chapters include:

- the problem of work
- greed, envy and the search for the self
- skill, power and authority
- work and reality.

*Object Relations, Work and the Self* will be of interest to psychoanalysts and organizational consultants as well as anyone concerned with what determines the quality of life in the workplace.

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Preface

Why do people work and what meaning does work have for them? At one time, the answer to these questions directed our attention toward external factors having to do with the income to be gained from work. But over time the external factors have become less important and internal factors have become progressively more important in any meaningful account of work motivation. This book focuses attention on those internal factors that shape the meaning of work and of work settings. In considering internal factors, three have central importance in our effort to understand the meaning of work: greed, guilt and the self. In this book, work is considered as an expression of these three factors taken separately and together. Special attention is paid to the factors that determine the individual’s emotional capacity to do work that engages the self and its creative potential and to the related matter of impairment in that capacity.

The material presented in this book developed over a number of years. An important part of this development was my experience in teaching students preparing for the world of work and especially for careers in which their jobs would be to facilitate work. Most of the case material included here was provided by my students and is presented with their permission. This, of course, only begins to indicate the degree to which my experience with them stimulated thinking and writing that eventuated in the book as it now appears.

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Chapter 2

The group at play

Development, at the level of activity, is the transition from play to work (Drellich 1970). In this chapter, I explore the problem of how we foster that transition. I am especially concerned with whether this is a transition from play to something antithetical to it, or a transition in which play develops in a way that allows it to take an adult form in work. To explore the problem, I make use of an experience I had with a group of students. These students were, I think, especially preoccupied with the transition to which I have just referred. Because it arose in a group setting, the problem of work and play became a problem in group life. My concern, then, will be with work, play, and their relationship to group life.

The students were pursuing degrees in international administration, intercultural communication, and conflict resolution. As part of their work toward their degrees students take courses in group dynamics aimed at preparing them, so far as that is possible, to cope with the interpersonal world of work organizations. Fourteen students enrolled in the course described below. All were MA students in their early to mid twenties. All had done previous coursework of a more traditional nature in group dynamics. In the class, students were asked to form themselves into a group and to decide on an activity that would enable them to accomplish the main objective of the class, which is the development of their capacity for what I refer to as “reflective autonomy.” By reflective autonomy I have in mind the ability of individuals to remove themselves emotionally from a group to which they belong, and then to think about the group, and through thinking to maintain an element of individual existence while participating in the group.

In my experience, some students are able to do this, and some are not. This means that the learning objectives of the course are only available to some of the students, and among those students they are available to different degrees. But, the only way to find out who can learn the skill and who cannot, or to what degree different students can learn the skill, is to afford them the opportunity to exercise it. As an aspect of learning, this is
not specific to the skill I refer to as reflective autonomy, but applies to all skills, since for all skills the ability to learn varies from person to person in ways we can only discover through experience.

No sooner had the primary task been defined for the group than the members forgot it, finding themselves instead without direction or guidance in a group they experienced as having no purpose, although it might be more accurate to say the group forgot its task, while at least some individuals in it did not, or they did to different degrees. Yet, while on the surface they had forgotten the task and found themselves without a purpose, on another level they had put the task aside in favor of one that was, for them, more pressing. It is worth noting that the primary task I had set for the group was, if not the solution to the problem the substitute task was meant to solve but could not, at least a method for arriving at a solution. This means that by forgetting the primary task the students placed themselves in a dilemma, one that was familiar to them in the sense that it had been imposed on them early in life, in their families, where all preparation for later group experience is made and all meaning in subsequent group experience is forged (Shapiro and Carr 1991). To resolve their dilemma, they would need to enter unfamiliar territory, something they were highly resistant to doing.

The first response of the group upon forgetting its primary task and finding itself without a task was to express in various ways its wish that it would be given a task by a “leader,” a term never given any clear meaning, but apparently meant to be a parental figure (i.e. the teacher) who understands their problem and how to solve it. Put another way, the group wanted a “reason to be” and it wanted that reason to be given to it rather than something that would arise from within. It is important that, from the outset, the impulse of the group was to turn outward rather than inward, to seek in external reality a way to be a group. It is important because it suggests how powerful was the dependence on authority in these students even as they reached the end of their period of dependence and were about to begin life as adults, which is to say as individuals acting independently. When the effort to find a leader failed, the group divided into two factions, which, following the usage of its members, I will refer to as the work group and the fun group.

The work group gained ascendancy early on and directed the group as a whole to define its task as learning about management in the usual way, through case studies and role play. In a sense, we can say that the work group was a group at play since it was playing at management, something not unusual in management training. As a work group, the students enacted and discussed how to deal with problems at work. In one case, the students imagined themselves managers dealing with a difficult employee who would not get her work done. In a second case, the students had to deal with an ethical dilemma at work in which management ordered them
to fire a co-worker for inappropriate reasons, knowing that if they did not do so they would put their own jobs at risk and thus seriously endanger the well-being of their families.

In reflecting on the exercises, I suggested to the students that they were struggling with a problem they associated with the workplace, and that the cases were chosen to communicate the problem to the class and the teacher in the hope that (1) there would be some understanding of how they felt about work, and (2) they might find a way of coping with the danger they felt work posed for them. While I did not put it in these terms, the problem as I understood it was coping with the bad self in the workplace. In this interpretation, the badly behaved co-worker and the badly behaved manager represented the students’ bad self projected onto others.

The projected bad self was responsible for making the workplace a difficult place to be. As long as the workplace remained a site for the projection of the bad self, it could never be a comfortable setting for working and living. On another level, and related to the above interpretation, the case studies could be thought of as dramatized representations of internal situations. Here, the inner world is made a difficult place to inhabit because of the power of the bad self (or bad internal object) there. The problem posed by the cases, then, is how do we cope with a world inhabited by the bad object so that we can work, live, and find gratification in so doing.

It may be worthwhile at this point to speculate briefly on the nature of the bad self enacted in these role play exercises given that this was not a bad self in general but one with specific features. These features centered on two impulses, one of which was to fail to work when work was demanded as part of a job, and the other was to victimize others in order to protect the self from victimization. In other words, the bad self was the self that did not want to work and the self engaged in transferring bad experiences onto others. The fantasy included not only a bad self, but also a good self that resisted its bad impulses and fought against the power that insisted the individual be the agent of the suffering of others. Further on, I will return to these impulses, which are important in understanding the meaning of work.

Had the students exercised reflective autonomy in the group, they might have come to realize something about the nature of the problem with which they were dealing, and in so doing fulfilled at least the first of the two hopes indicated above, which is the hope that someone would understand their dilemma, even if that someone could not resolve it for them. But, my effort to help them see this was not successful, indicating to me that the problem lay not simply, or primarily, in the assumed presence of the bad self at work, but in the necessity to hide the bad self at work, something we could not do if we exercised reflective autonomy there. If the problem is primarily that of hiding the bad self, then the hypothesis that the cases were essentially narrative depictions of inner dramas gains credibility, and there is little we can do in a classroom setting to help the student.
The students quickly tired of the role play exercises, realizing I think that they would not help them with their problem. At this point the fun group took over and the students decided to play soccer as their activity. It should be mentioned that the composition of the two groups, the fun group and the work group, was somewhat fluid, and while certain students clearly began and remained in one or the other, many students moved between them. This fluidity suggests that the fun and work groups were really two aspects of a single group. The soccer game was experienced as a turning point for the students, who in light of it interpreted the role play exercise in a negative way, as an effort to hold onto the old way of learning in the classroom, while playing soccer represented a step forward. It was understood that the soccer game represented the realization that they did not have to solve their problem at all, but could just go out together and have fun instead; and it was stated explicitly that doing so would enhance rather than impede their ability to achieve the course’s learning objectives, notwithstanding the virtual impossibility of exercising reflective autonomy while playing soccer.

The soccer game was experienced as a great success, even a triumph. Students observed that while soccer is a competitive sport, the two teams managed to play the game in a cooperative way. All that this necessitated, of course, was that the wide disparity in skill levels among the students be reduced if not eliminated by the accomplished players suppressing their abilities in service of group cohesion. We could say, then, that the success of the soccer game depended in part at least on the repression of the bad self, which here was the competitive self, the self that placed itself above the group as a whole. In other words, however different the fun and work groups were on the surface, underneath they were about the same task, which was to avoid acknowledging and dealing with the problem posed by the presence of a bad self.

After the seeming success of the soccer game, the group spent the next period playing Pictionary, a game similar to charades except, rather than acting out the words, the players attempt to communicate them by drawing pictures. The game created a heightened level of excitement, and was generally judged a success. No one attempted to reflect on its meaning for the group, though an obvious interpretation would confirm that the group was continuing along the path it had set for itself from the beginning. My hypothesis was that in playing this game the group was attempting to communicate its inability to communicate. Individuals in the group were saying: There is something important I want you (the other members of the group or possibly the teacher) to understand, but I cannot say what I want to communicate. Put in the language of the self, I cannot communicate my self to you. I fear that the world I am about to enter into is one where I cannot be myself; and presumably I fear it because this is the world I have always been in; indeed it is my own inner world. In that world, the self is not in play.
In the game, the participants are prevented from using their primary adult means of communication because the rules prohibit it. If we treat the game as a metaphor of the kind suggested above, then this prohibition in the rules represents a factor internal to the individual psyche, the factor that prohibits saying the words that would communicate to others the dilemma we feel and the desire that drives that dilemma and that must not be given expression. The internal prohibition is, then, projected onto the rules of the game, and in the game we act out the dilemma we face because we cannot allow ourselves to say what we want and how we feel. A tragic internal situation becomes a comic exhibition as each student competes to convey to the group a randomly chosen word or phrase without saying it. In the game, however, unlike in life, the students triumph over their self-imposed disability, so we can interpret the game not only as an effort to communicate, but also as a dramatization of a wished-for outcome. In this, the game activates a primitive use of play as a way of achieving mastery over a troubling situation.

In the final week, the group played Ultimate Frisbee in an attempt to recapture the spirit of the soccer game, but felt that it had failed to do so. Apparently the hope the students thought had been fulfilled through playing games and having fun had not been fulfilled. The dilemma remained. I attempted to get the group to focus its attention on why it felt this way and what it meant, but the group instead became tired and withdrawn, expressing its wish to end the class early. I wondered if the failure to repeat the emotional experience of the soccer game resulted from the implicit realization that regressing to childhood games would not solve a problem about the world of adult living because adult living was not a game, and the problem was how to maintain in it an element of play while accepting that we could not simply turn it into a game.

I think it will be helpful at this point to consider some aspects of the kinds of games the students chose to play, which were games involving competition between teams. Clearly, the ideas of team and game are playing an important role here. What do they connote? Of special importance for my students, I think, were the following characteristics:

- The games offered a form of relatedness in which participants did not really relate (communicate), so they involved no danger that anything threatening or unacceptable would be acknowledged. Feelings were acted out rather than acknowledged and discussed.
- The team sport enacts a fantasy of oneness and simultaneously of feeling threatened. It enacts the externalization of a threat originating inside (aggression). This is the competitive aspect of the game, which enacts the idea that there is a prize (the good self) that cannot be
shared. It is also the aspect of the game that intensifies the experience of belonging, and the associated loss of self.

- The game is not only an enactment, but a compulsive, ritualized, repeated enactment. The ritualized aspect of the game, which stems from its containment within rules, creates distance from the emotional experience that it is all about. It ensures that the enactment will not be personal, or at least will not be experienced as a personal drama. The ritualized aspect of the enactment keeps the experience reenacted from being known. In other words, it does not require that we exercise “the capacity to actually have the experience, in the sense of staying with it . . . rather than seeking to dismiss, or to find some way of bypassing it” (Waddell 1998, pp. 27–8, emphasis in original).

Apparently, some students imagined that good management training meant learning how to join a team and play a game. While one might argue that this view of the world has some merit at least so far as expectations in many organizations are concerned, it also expresses confusion about what enables the individual to do what needs to be done to fit into such organizations. This is because what is needed for this result is not learning through the practice of competitive sport, but the mobilization of primitive defenses that involve adaptation through merger into the narcissistic self of our earliest caretakers. In other words, team-building exercises are not about learning but about activating a regressive impulse. The purpose of the exercise then is to suppress autonomy and creativity, or, in other words, to assure that the self is not put in play at work. Ensuring that the self is not in play at work offers protection against the bad self in the form of projection onto those not part of the team.

The problem in this is not that regression must be the enemy of learning. On the contrary, so far as learning engages the creative capacity, it calls on our ability to regress. But the regression associated with creativity is not the regression just considered, which seeks merger into a narcissistic object and self-repression as a survival strategy. The regression associated with creativity takes us into a space separate from the object, yet nonetheless dependent on it. This separation is what Winnicott refers to as intermediate space, which is also a space in which we can create our world rather than having it imposed on us as it would be if we followed our impulse toward merger. For Winnicott, play is only really play when it is not the ritualized following of rules, but the experience of “formlessness,” which means placing ourselves into a “non-purposive state, as one might say a sort of ticking over of the unintegrated personality” (2001, p. 55).

A game may create a greater or lesser amount of room for play depending on how completely the rules dictate what the participants do rather than simply providing a minimal setting for playing together. This then determines whether the game becomes a ritualized enactment of an
emotional problem and its wished-for solution, or a setting for shaping a
creative response. Clearly, even the highly structured games played by my
students allowed at least some room for play, because, within the rules,
behavior was not rigidly imposed nor movement rigidly controlled. If
games always seek to enact emotional problems and their wished-for reso-
lution, they may do so more or less creatively.\textsuperscript{5} In other words, they may
incorporate play to a greater or lesser degree, and the repetition of the game
may or may not turn into a ritual depending on the rigidity of the form it
imposes on what the participants do.

If we focus our attention not on its competitive aspect or rule-bound
nature, but on the opportunity it provided for a form of physical expression
not available in the classroom setting, the soccer game might be considered
an expression of the students’ desire for a freer form of play. In my
experience, student groups, once given the freedom to determine for them-
selves what they will do, often seek activities that take them out of the
classroom. This suggests that students experience the classroom as in some
important sense a form of confinement. The desire to play soccer might
then represent the interpretation of their confinement as a physical restraint
and a desire to free themselves from it.

Considered as a desire for physical activity, the desire to move outside
and play a game there can be understood as, among other things, a desire
for self-expression of the kind Winnicott refers to when he equates the true
self with the spontaneous gesture. Then, the game expressed an equation
between freedom and its most primitive form in freedom of movement. This
understanding should lead us to wonder about the way in which an experi-
cence of confinement in the inner world was experienced as a physical reality
in the world outside and addressed there while remaining untouched in its
true setting. This then raises the following question: What is the nature of
the confinement felt by the students that they expressed in physical terms,
and what form of restraint does the classroom represent for them? We do
have a sense, of course, that what is felt to be confined is something like the
sense of vitality and aliveness originally experienced as part of the body and
that through emotional maturation becomes an attribute of that broader
psychic reality inclusive of bodily and mental experience we refer to as the
self. Our question would then be: What is the nature of the characteristic
confinement experienced by the self in its world?

In answering this question, we might begin by observing that, for students,
the classroom is experienced as an unsafe place for them to experience, let
alone express, whatever sense of vitality remains available to them. I think
this is a reasonable enough interpretation given the nature of the typical
classroom experience where, for reasons both good and bad, students are
required to limit their presence in ways they no doubt experience as a form of
confinement. Once told, as they were in my class, that this was no longer
necessary, they naturally assumed that to appreciate fully the opportunity now made available they would need to move outside of the classroom.

The experience of confinement to which I have just referred may be real enough, but there remains the matter of the students’ inability to experience any real measure of their vitality other than in physical movement, which suggests that something important remained confined once the students moved outside the classroom. This hypothesis gains support when we take into account the ultimate failure of the games to provide the students their wished-for experience. To get at this continuing confinement, which is the confinement for which bodily containment in the classroom acts as a metaphor, we need to consider the possibility that the conscious wish to move outside the classroom is the expression of an unconscious wish to escape the experience of the inner world as a prison.

In general, what makes the inner world a prison is the dominance there of harshly repressive object relations. As I have suggested, this configuration engenders a powerful impulse to attempt to escape from the world in which these relations dominate. Having transferred their internal world onto the world of the classroom, an act encouraged as I have said by the typical form of object relations there, they then imagined that physical escape from the classroom would mean emotional escape from the prison of the inner world. And, given the tendency to experience the imprisoning of the psyche as an imprisoning of the body, they naturally found that escape meant finding a place where physical movement if not altogether free of restraint, was at least notably freer. Their eventual disappointment with the games that had originally been experienced as a triumph is not surprising given that having escaped from the classroom they remained in the psychic prison for which the classroom was little more than a metaphor.

To play, then, is to escape from the prison of work. And yet missing in this commonly expressed construction is the fact that the prison is here of the students’ own making, and, more importantly, it is a prison they take with them when they go to play. And because the prison is of their own making, they can neither imagine nor do work that has any other meaning. In the end, they seek out work in which they feel imprisoned so that they can externalize their responsibility for their fate.

As I suggest above, my hypothesis that a driving force in shaping the group was the need to deal with the bad self gains a measure of support from the emphasis the students placed on the idea that they would be a “good” group. The idea of the good group shaped and directed their struggles over the group’s activity because it was the quality of the activity that would determine whether the group was good or not. In all of this, what it meant to be a good group was never clear, and this lack of clarity suggested that being good had become an end disconnected from any specific goals or accomplishments that might be judged worthwhile. Indeed, this disconnec-
tion goes a long way in accounting for the students’ dissatisfaction with any and all of the activities proposed for the group. This disconnection moved the students in the direction of making the group’s goal to establish a strong feeling of belonging rather than to do anything.

While it was clear that good, on one level at least, meant good in the eyes of the instructor, insistence on the good group as end was in direct conflict with the instructor’s stated goal for the course, which was not to teach students how to create good groups, but to teach them how to retain an element of individual existence in groups so they could understand what was going on in the group and cope more constructively with it. Indeed, during the term I stated more than once not only that I had no interest in whether the group was good or bad, but that good and bad were not well-defined terms for the activity of the group during the term. Thus, the intensity of the students’ involvement with the matter of the good group can be measured by their refusal to take in what I had told them about the goal of the course and their insistence, contrary to my explicit statements, that their goal would be to have a good group.

It might be relevant to mention in this connection that the students in the course were preparing for careers in what they thought of as public service, which is to say, in service of the public good. Their preoccupation with being part of a good group can be understood, then, to derive its power from the same source as did their commitment to devote their careers to the service of the good. It would not be unreasonable to assume, without making any judgment of the students’ career choices, that the emotional significance of the career choice and of the desire to be part of a good group was the same: coping with the bad self by devoting themselves to doing good work, which is work that aims to repair (fantasized) damage done to the good object, and doing penance for their badness in damaging that object.

If work means to repair or atone, then work opposes play and you have to give up play to work. Because work now adopts the character of service, work must be assigned rather than expressing any creative impulse in the individual at work. So, when no one gave my students an assignment, and, contrary to the norm, I did not tell them what work to do, this produced for them a dilemma. They were unable to assign themselves work that would express their aspirations and interests because that, by definition, is not what a good group does, so at first they sought to mimic what they had been assigned to do in the past (the work group). When this failed to satisfy their need for work as service, they eventually confronted that need and, for a moment at least, decided to give it up altogether, which for them meant giving up work in favor of fun (they became the fun group). Their problem then was that they had no idea of work separate from service of the kind just mentioned, and therefore when they were not given work to do, they could not work.
Their frustration with the impossibility of finding the ideal activity suitable to the ideal group, and the fact that they were required to reflect on their frustration and the sources feeding it, led them to realize that their goal was unachievable and self-destructive. This realization allowed them, at least for a moment, to let themselves off the hook by dropping the idea that they would find the ideal activity and form the ideal group. Then, the exhilaration of their play when they turned themselves from the work group into the fun group can be assumed to express their liberation from servitude and from the demand that they do good deeds to atone for and repair the damage they had done (or imagined they had done) to the good object. But, their exhilaration could also be considered a response to the illusion that their problem, which was their deeply held conviction that they needed to atone and repair, had been solved by the simple mechanism of giving up on the goal and allowing themselves to have fun. In the language of Freud’s structural model, they imagined that they had, by an act of will, overthrown the power of the superego in their inner worlds. While this regression felt liberating for a moment, it could not be sustained because it is not possible to live as an adult, and to work in an adult world, on the basis of the regressed emotional state, not to mention that the idea they had indeed defeated the superego by an act of will was, to say the least, unrealistic.

One element noticeably absent from the games played by my students is the element of creativity. My students simply followed well-known rules, or in the case of Pictionary, simply took the game out of a box. In the role play exercises, the students found their cases on the Internet rather than making them up themselves. Indeed, I was struck, as were some of the students, by the lack of creativity in the group, exhibited not only by the way it acted but also by its choice of activities. I do not think this lack of creativity can reasonably be attributed to a special deficiency in the students, at least when compared with the norm for persons at their stage in life. Rather, the lack of creativity needs to be considered as a kind of symptom of the problem with which they were grappling, which here appears as a problem of the inhibition of creativity. To understand better the meaning of this symptom, we need to consider more closely the meaning of play, which is to say its emotional significance and purpose.

To begin to do so, we might consider Winnicott’s account of play and its connection to creativity given that the absence of creativity was such a striking feature of the activities chosen by my students. Winnicott considers the ability to play virtually synonymous with the capacity for creativity in living. As he puts it, “in playing, and perhaps only in playing, the child or adult is free to be creative” (Winnicott 2001, p. 53). This freedom is directly related to the suspension of the reality principle and the entrance into intermediate space. Without the capacity to enter into this space, there is only external reality and the necessity of adapting to it. When all we can do
is adapt to what already exists for us outside, then what already exists outside us is all that can exist. The outer world becomes a reality into which we disappear, with the result that we have no special existence or subjective reality of our own. Because we do not exist, nothing we do can be said to express our subjective presence.

When what we do represents only our adaptation to a reality predetermined for us, then we are not alive in any but the physical sense of the term; in other words, we have no being to call on as the mainspring of our action. In an important sense of the term, however busy we may seem to be, we cannot really be said to occupy our lives, to be present or exist there. We can only be creative when we exist and what we do expresses that existence. What Winnicott refers to as creativity in living “indicates that he who is, is alive” (1986, p. 39).

Winnicott’s notion of play applies poorly to the games played by my students. An important reason for this is that the games they chose to play were of the kind played by children older than those whose activity was Winnicott’s primary concern. Thus, as Martin Bergmann observes: “After latency sets in, the capacity to play gradually fades. Rule-governed games replace the free play of earlier childhood. The games of latency children increasingly become adaptations to reality” (1993, p. 267).

Because adaptation to reality intrudes so powerfully in games played by older children, and the play element recedes, those games express not liberation from the reality principle and the defeat of the superego, but the power of the superego in the psyche. It is not surprising then that playing the games they did offered my students no real relief from their dilemma.

Play for my students carried the meaning not of creativity in living, but of practicing adaptation to external reality. Here, we deal with play understood as an effort to “try on solutions and adaptations to potentially conflictual situations” (Marans et al. 1993, p. 21). This was clear enough in the activity of the work group, which was involved in playing at management as a vocation. In this it mimicked a vital element in all teaching and learning, which is the element of play understood as trying on a way of being and a mode of conduct in the world.

Yet a problem remained, and it was the problem of all adult and adult-oriented forms of play. This is the problem of retaining in adult life the vital element in the play of the young child, which is the element Winnicott characterizes by the term creativity. It is this “relation between children’s play and later creativity in adulthood” (Marans et al. 1993, p. 22) that contributed to the dilemma my students experienced in finding an activity for their group. If Joan Erikson is correct when she insists that the opposite of to play is not to work but to obey, then there must be a way of conceiving work not as the opposite of play, but as a continuation of the urge to and capacity for play (Benveniste 1988, p. 53). But, if this is so,
the preparation my students had for work did not seem to enable them to conceive it in this way.

In all of the games my students played, competition held a prominent place in the activity. When the students played Pictionary, they first divided themselves into teams and kept score by recording which team was more often the first to decipher the communication. We create competition by establishing the goal of play as a prize that cannot be shared. If, then, we consider competition an enactment of an idea, it is the idea that in living there is a prize that cannot be shared, and, indeed, that living is about seeking this prize. It might seem that this description of competition is inconsistent with play in groups (teams) because the members of the winning group share the prize. Yet, the inconsistency disappears when we consider the nature of the prize, which is the dominance of the self in a world of competing selves. Then, because a team is the, at least temporary, reality of a group self, in team competition there are only two competing selves, and the prize cannot be shared between them.

If we understand competition in this way, then we can consider it a modality of the search for the self. The purpose of competition is to discover where the one true self lies: in us or in the other. This is what makes competition so intense and so exhilarating. The exuberance with which the game is played derives from the hope kept alive in it that we will find that the one true self is ours. In this respect, competitive sport is both similar to and different from play as Winnicott defines it. Winnicott emphasizes the link between play and the search for the self: “It is in playing and only in playing that the individual child or adult is able to be creative and to use the whole personality, and it is only in being creative that the individual discovers the self” (2001, p. 54).

Competitive sport is also a search for the self in the sense I have just suggested. But, competitive sport constructs the self for us differently than does play. This is because competitive sport is not the doing that expresses being, but the triumph over being.

For my students, the triumph over being was a two-edged sword. To the extent that their lives as students meant, to a significant degree, practicing compliance as preparation for the world of work, the triumph over being enacted in the games might be considered a revolt against being for other because the triumph was over the self in other. At the same time, the triumph over being enacted in the game did not release the students to make doing an expression of being themselves because the self was not really at play in the game. The phrase used by one of my students to capture the feeling of the games underscores this point. She described the games as “mind-numbing.” This suggests that the triumph over the self in other is also a reenactment of the defeat of our selves. Numbing the mind is something we might need to do to the extent that we have internalized a
powerful negative judgment about the self and must somehow quiet its voice. If this is a major function of play, we cannot consider it the expression of creativity and the search for the self.

Let me return now to the question I raised earlier about the group’s ability to solve the students’ problem. To do so, I would like to consider a comment offered by one student on the division of the group into two parts, the work and fun groups, which she refers to as two schools of thought: “Underneath the surface of these two schools of thought, lay an even greater struggle between the id (just have fun; don’t do anything educationally relevant because you don’t have to) and the superego (this is your valuable class time; you should do something educationally enriching even if you are not required to).” What interested me in this student’s use of Freud’s structural model (something I had not presented to them or emphasized in their previous class work), was the missing middle term. In her way of characterizing the group, it consisted of a psyche having a superego and an id, and nothing else.

To have a superego and an id and nothing else is to be limited to a source of instinctual drive and an agency that judges the self according to ideals. So to have only an id and a superego is to lack the capacity for reality testing and adaptation to reality. But, it is also to lack the center of subjective existence sometimes referred to as the self. To be sure, this center of subjective existence has its origin in an original vitality, which is part of our natural endowment. In Freud’s language, it originates in the id. Yet, the self is also something more because it represents our ability to suspend external determination, including that of our natural impulse and drive, in favor of a determination internal not to the body but to the psyche. In other words, what is missing in the group that consists only of id and superego is self-determination, which is the path we follow when we are led neither by nature nor by the dictates of externally fixed norms and imperatives in conduct.

We may note that Freud’s structural model has little space for the idea of subjective experience, or creativity as Winnicott terms it. Clearly, the ego may suspend instinctual gratification either because doing so protects the personality as a whole from dangers seeking gratification is imagined to pose or because doing so makes the prospect of gratification more likely by adapting conduct to reality. But, the ego remains “as much in a dependent relation to the claims of the id as it is to the imperatives of the super-ego and the demands of external reality” (Laplanche and Pontalis 1973, p. 130). The ego cannot, then, be considered a center of subjective experience. For creativity in Winnicott’s sense more is needed. The individual must be able to say no to instinctual drive or natural imperative, not because in so doing he or she will be better protected from threat or will be more likely to adapt the search for gratification to the demands of reality, but because doing so...
is the way the individual asserts that he or she exists. For our purposes, the important element missing in a group that has an id and a superego and nothing else is not the element of adaptation and defense against threat, but the element of subjective existence, the being expressed in doing. Without this element, finding an activity that would be good posed an insoluble dilemma because being good meant three potentially inconsistent things: satisfying the drives, satisfying the superego by conforming to an ego-ideal, and assuring that the individual members can exist.

My student’s image of the group as having only an id and a superego was consistent with that offered by another student, who emphasized the polarized thinking in the group with respect to matters of good and bad, and the group’s tendency to fluctuate between extremes of exhilaration and depression. It will not be surprising to find that involvement in groups impairs the individual’s ability to integrate good and bad. One function of the group is to mobilize the hope to merge with the good object and dispel the bad, so group participation must bear at best a problematic relationship to the individual’s aspiration to integrate the two. What is of special interest here is the link between this impairment of the capacity for integration and the exclusion of the self from the group so that it had only the id and superego to call upon. My suggestion about the significance of this is the following: The students’ inability to invest what they did with the element of creativity derived from their inability to manage their internal bad object, and especially from their insistence that the bad object be gotten rid of by denial and repression rather than integrated into the personality. Thus, the intensity with which the members of the group insisted that theirs must be a “good group” expressed the group’s underlying dilemma, which was that to be a good group meant both to mobilize the self in the group so that the gratification resulting from self-activity could be gained, and to repress the self so that the bad object could be held at bay.

Good and bad here are all about the possibility that the self might be in play at work. Larry Hirschhorn formulates this in the language of “psychological presence.” In his words, individuals must “increasingly rely on their person rather than their role authority for making decisions” (Hirschhorn 1997, p. 33). Putting the self in play at work can be both good and bad. This is partly because the self in play might be the good self or it might be the bad self, so the invitation to be psychologically present might be experienced as a wished-for opportunity or as a danger to be avoided. But it is also in part because the workplace might be experienced as a threat to the good self, which must therefore be hidden from sight and thus kept out of play. So far as we experience significant ambivalence about our selves, and so far as the world of work is not a safe place to be your self, while we may hope our selves can be put in play at work, we also fear that they might be. Then, one of the outcomes we most wish for in our training for the world of work is that it will enable us to avoid being psychologically
present so we can protect our selves from the danger of exposure there. If this is our fear, then, management training fits the bill so far as it offers us ways of maintaining our distance from the interpersonal dimension of work by ritualizing our relationship to it.7

One of the things management training offers us as a way of avoiding psychological presence at work is the opportunity to join a group, or in the more popular language, to be part of a team. My students were aware of this possibility and treated the class as a sort of training ground for using groups to counter the threat of exposure. They formulated the issue in the language of “bonding.” From the outset, many of them made bonding the group’s primary task, which goes a long way in accounting for their tendency to forget the primary task as I had formulated it. Again, there will be nothing surprising in this for students of groups.8 In this class, bonding operated as a social defense against the primary task of the course, exercising reflective autonomy, which was correctly seen as a threat to bonding and the hiding of the self secured by it. The impulse to employ group bonding as a defense against the presence of the self was so powerful that when I offered it as a suggested interpretation of the events of the term during our last session, the class immediately shifted from a sense of exhilaration to one of discouragement and fatigue, expressing the wish that I would let them go.

We cannot, of course, teach students to be comfortable allowing their selves to be present at work; nor should we attempt to. As Winnicott suggests, it is important that each of us has on call a false self to protect the true self from the dangers posed to it in the world of relatedness with others.9 That the workplace poses a threat because of its use as a site for projection of the bad self in no way diminishes the reality of the danger we experience there. By and large, the workplace is not a safe setting for the self; and yet if we cannot put our selves into play at work, we can hardly expect to derive any mature gratification from work, or therefore to be able to work well. This was, I think, the dilemma my students felt, each in his or her own way. As one student put it, there was something beyond the issue of bonding, something more significant: “Yet, below that surface, there still remain the lingering feelings of fear of self-exposure, fear of failure, and fear of no purpose.”

From the beginning of the term, I was struck by the possible significance of the fact that this course was taking place during the spring quarter, that its timing coincided with the end of the academic year, and that, for many students in the class, the end of the academic year also coincided with the end of their time in school. In other words, many of the students were about to complete their formal education. Of course, some would at some point return to school, but this in no way diminished the emotional significance of the moment, especially the powerful elements of transition and loss.
Linked to this transition was the question of preparedness to enter the world outside the academy, a transition often framed in a language designed to capture its connection to the earlier transition from the family to the world outside, from the internal world to the world of the reality of others and of relatedness with them, a world of autonomy and responsibility, an adult world where the student is expected to be an adult. In this language, the school is a place separate from the "real world." Of course, all of my students had in one way or another worked in that world, so the transition was not expected to be too abrupt. Yet, in the past when they worked there it was with the knowledge that they were still in some sense students, temporarily visiting the other world that was meant to be their fate, but not quite yet. We might then imagine a fantasy associated with their previous work experience, the fantasy that it was not quite the one for which they were preparing themselves: not quite as good, or perhaps not quite as bad.

I think the pervasive idea that the academy is not part of the real world is an important one, and goes to the heart of the problem with which I am concerned here, which is the preparation of students for life in the world outside. The academy is unreal, of course, only in the sense that in it the student need not take full responsibility for him or her self, but continues in a relationship of dependence in which responsibility can be shifted, at least to a degree, onto the teacher and the school. Does the student imagine, then, that it is this relationship of dependence that alone makes play possible? Or, does the student imagine that it is this relation of dependence that constitutes the main obstacle to play? After all, if the academy remains outside the real world, and we understand the reality of that world to be the opposing pole to play, then leaving the academy means giving up play in favor of work divorced from play. Then, the work of the academy is weaning students from play, and the desire of my students to play expresses their understandable resistance to their fate, a resistance empowered by its proximity. The fun group was, then, an expression of the students' revolt against reality. Yet, there is also the ritualized nature of their play to consider, which is to say their inability to play in Winnicott's sense of the term. Their inability to play in this sense did not, however, reduce their conviction that what they most wanted to do was to play.

The kind of play they chose was team sport. Team sport is the middle term between children's play and adult living. It is a transition in that it is the form of play that marks the end of play. As the form of play that marks the end of play, it fosters a transition to adult living in which play is not a significant element. Put another way, it prepares the child to live as an adult in a particular sense and to do work of a particular kind. This quality of team sport accounts for its popularity as a metaphor for living and especially for work in organizations. Indeed, the organization preoccupied with the notion of the team can be seen as an organization devoted to making
work life a continuation of the adolescent solution to the problem of living, which is to join a team and play a competitive sport.

This solution to the problem of living is a variant of the solution emphasized by Wilfred Bion in his study of groups. Bion suggests that we consider joining a group as an alternative to development (Bion 1961, p. 89). The wish expressed by this is that knowing how to live and what to do as an adult in an adult world requires only knowing how to join a group and lose ourselves in it. But, because this is knowledge we already have, the idea of adult living as joining a team is the idea that we do not need to develop at all, but, as Bion puts it, that we arrive in life already fully equipped to live as an adult. This is a comforting idea, especially for the adolescent concerned about his or her ability to make the transition to adult living, because it insists that no transition is needed. If adult living means joining a team and playing a game, then one need not be an adult to live that way.

Thus, while we might interpret their desire to play as a revolt against reality as my students perceived it, we might also consider their inability to play as an expression of an already developed impairment of their creative capabilities, an impairment promoted in the interests of adaptation to reality. This impairment combined with their construction of reality as the enemy of play created the dilemma that was the central fact of their group experience in class. If, then, we also consider this impairment the result of the way we (their parents and teachers) have prepared them for reality, and, indeed, have posed for them the problem of reality, we can begin to understand the full magnitude of their dilemma. As many of the students observed during the term, they felt ill-prepared to cope with a course that allowed them to create rather than repeat. In this sense, it can be said of the students that this class set for them a task for which they had not been prepared. They were ill-prepared, however, not because this is a task for which one needs any special preparation, but for the opposite reason. They were ill-prepared because they had been prepared to renounce creativity in favor of adaptation. It is not creativity that requires preparation, but living a life without it. Yet, even if this was true, it was not true of all the students and, though it may have been true to some extent of most of them, it was not true to the same degree. This difference is important because it alone opens up the possibility that the class might succeed for at least some of those enrolled in it, and, more generally, that education suitable to creativity in work might be possible for at least some students.

The question we might ask is whether students can integrate work and play. How can work be different from children’s play and yet not the simple negation of it? Is it possible to make regressive experience of the kind implied in play and creativity available at work without destroying the workplace? The answer to this question depends on the nature of the regression and of the factors that promote it. When regression is promoted by anxiety, and
especially when leadership creates and intensifies anxiety so it can use it to promote regression, there can be space neither for play nor creativity in Winnicott’s sense. But, when regression occurs within a safe environment where anxiety is contained, there is the possibility of creativity at work. Put in another language, when leadership participates in a process of raising the stakes, a process analogous to the competitive sport in which the prize to be won and lost is everything of value in the game, then the regression it promotes is in the direction of the paranoid orientation to the world inscribed in competitive sport. Where this is the case, the integration of work and play is not possible because work has a different purpose, which is to act out a paranoid fantasy grounded in the presence in the psyches of those who shape the workplace of a too-powerful internal bad object. Then, as my students feared, the bad self is the dominant reality of the workplace, and their dilemma cannot be resolved there.

Combining work and play requires an appropriate idea of work, which is an idea that work is something other than a way to repair and atone for the damage done to the object, or, in Erikson’s language (see Benveniste 1988, p. 53), an idea that to work is something other than to obey. To combine work and play, then, means to escape from servitude. The problem is complicated by the fact that obedience refers to our relationship not only with others, but with our own internalized objects. To obey the dictates of a harsh and demanding superego is no less servitude than to obey the directives of others for whom we put ourselves to work. To escape from servitude means to “rove autonomously,” which we can only do if we are “able to achieve comfort from the internal object representation” (Pine 1989, pp. 164–5). The solution to my students’ problem lies in the availability of an object with which they can identify, an object that is capable of integrating work and play. Only where home and school offer objects of this kind can students escape the dilemma in which those in my class found themselves.

If in play we suspend the reality principle and in work we submit ourselves to it, how can we imagine that it might be possible to integrate the two? The answer to this question hinges on the third term: reality. If the power of reality over us cannot be challenged and our submission to it must be complete then no integration of work and play is possible, which means that we must give up play if we are to work. But, if reality is not what is already given to and determined for us, but what is possible but not yet actual, then the terms of the opposition of work and play alter in a way that no longer excludes integration. Certain kinds of reality resist any effort to integrate work and play, while others do not.

The distinction between different kinds of reality bears directly on the problem of the relationship between play and learning. If we learn when we alter the way we think to accord better with reality, how we learn will depend on whether the reality we place ourselves in a relationship with is

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the reality that already is or the reality that is possible. Learning means either adapting to reality or entering into a creative relationship with it. In the former interpretation, play can have no place in learning; in the latter, learning can only take place where play is possible.

Early in my account of the student group, I suggested that the solution to their dilemma could be found in the exercise of the capacity for reflective autonomy, which was the stated goal of the course. Yet, it cannot be obvious why this should be the case. How can the exercise of reflective autonomy facilitate the integration of work and play and therefore help solve the problem of development with which I have suggested my students were concerned? How does reflective autonomy help accomplish the end set by Winnicott, which is for the individual to retain throughout life “something that belongs properly to infant experience: the ability to create the world” (1986, p. 40).

The answer I would like to offer is that creativity in living requires the separation of the individual from the group, and that what I refer to as reflective autonomy is simply the manifestation of this separation. Separation of the individual from the group is the continuation of the separation of the infant or young child from his or her caretaker, a separation expressed by the entry of the child into intermediate space. To live creatively, we must be able to move out of the world already created for us, especially the world of the group, and we must be able to do so without renouncing that world and the necessity that we live in it. When we are in a group, reflective autonomy is the capacity to create a space for ourselves. The exercise of reflective autonomy, then, is the clearing of space for creativity in adult living. We exercise reflective autonomy when we suspend the impulse to comply and by complying disappear into a world already made for us. Nurturing the capacity for reflective autonomy may be the best we can do as teachers to facilitate the integration of work and play.