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The Temporality of Embodied Intelligence

Norman O. Brown
and Anton Ehrenzweig

This pairing of the words, “togetherness elsewhere,” creates an idea of spatial-temporal tension. “Togetherness” gives primacy to the present and the local, a gathering together to create a shared situation. “Elsewhere” on the other hand points to an outside or a beyond, a deferred space/time. And yet, the inherent concepts of “togetherness elsewhere” also share a common concern with *otherness*. “Togetherness” seeks meaningful connection with all that is other than me in a given situation. “Elsewhere” reaches out to my existence beyond any given temporal/spatial present. In both cases as well, recognition of otherness is also a recognition of that which is deferred, that which remains in excess. When I experience togetherness, though I may be intimately gathered with the other, I never become completely incorporated with the other. Also, I am continually reminded that I cannot be wholly elsewhere, for if I were, that elsewhere would naturally become “here.” Yet, the human capacity to exist beyond the bounds of one's own self is also integral to the experience of togetherness. We must be able to reach out in order to gather together.

Through techniques of abstract thinking and digital technologies we are increasingly dislodged from the “here,” for what is here is merely interface and not the true object of our concern. Nevertheless, we continue to want to reach out to what is beyond, to connect with what is quivering through from elsewhere. But what is at stake in our concern with pushing out beyond ourselves while simultaneously gathering together in a bonded experience with the other? What is the nature of these outreaching and ingathering movements of human existence? To begin to dig into these questions we will move below the surface so to speak, with an examination of what psychoanalytic thinking has contributed to understanding of the energetic movement of human being. Specifically, this paper turns to the work of Norman O. Brown and Anton Ehrenzweig to grapple with the nature of the human need for togetherness, as well as the human capacity to reach out to that which is *other than* or *in excess* of the strict bounds of ourselves.

In his 1959 book *Life against Death* Norman Brown is interested in opening up rather primary questions of human existence. In Part One he states: “Mankind today is still making history without having any conscious idea of what it really wants or under what conditions it would stop being unhappy; in fact what it is doing seems to be making itself more unhappy and calling that unhappiness progress” (Brown, 1959, p. 16). To wrestle with this question of why it is that humans continually remain so discontented, behave so aggressively towards others, and suffer guilt, Brown turns to Sigmund Freud’s contribution to understanding the nature of human being. As Brown points out, psychoanalysis reminds us that we are bodies. Freud’s theory of the drives comes off the surface of the body. The deep human need and capacity for togetherness, to give and to receive belongingness, also emerges from our primary experience of embodiment. As Brown argues, this longing for connection with others stems from our unique human experience of a prolonged infancy, an experience that distinguishes us from other animals. Human infants are born helpless; as babies we are entirely dependent on the care of another. This distinctly human experience has a double effect in shaping our movement through life. First of all, it instils in us a capacity for narcissistic pleasure. Through a total immersion in the care, attention and love given us by our primary caregivers in infancy, we completely absorb and indulge in a state of protection from the realities of life. This state of reception and absorption develops in us our capacity for omnipotent indulgence in pleasure. Brown states that

infancy is protected from the harshness of reality by parental care; it represents a period of privileged irresponsibility and freedom from the domination of the reality-principle. This privileged irresponsibility permits

and promotes an early blossoming of the essential desires of the human being, without repression and under the sign of the pleasure-principle (pp. 24-25).

On the other hand, our experience of prolonged infancy creates in us a marked dependency on others. We never forget our primary experience of being totally connected to another, of complete need for another and dependence on the other for life. This primary experience of a deep bond with an other through Eros, that is to say, through a life-giving bond of love, creates in us a deep need for connection with others. As Brown states,

the infant's objective dependence on parental, especially maternal, care promotes a dependent attitude toward reality and inculcates a passive (dependent) need to be loved, which colours all subsequent interpersonal relationships. This psychological vulnerability is subsequently exploited to extract submission to social authority and to the reality-principle in general (p. 25).

Through this we develop a dependency on others, and continue to seek to renew this attachment to the world and to others.

Thus our primary erotic bond with our maternal caregiver, which in infancy is our entire world, instils in us a deep need for connection with others and the world. However, as psychoanalysis points out, there is also a painful side to this experience. As we mature, as we take up a name and identity in the social world, we must break with this experience of narcissistic pleasure and erotic dependence. Once this break has been made, we can never go back, and yet we also never forget what it was to be held in the complete, centred attention of another. We learn to repress our desires in order to fit into the social world, but the desire for connectedness, embodied togetherness, remains enmeshed in the very fabric of our existence. Through our experience of prolonged infancy, we develop the need and capacity for connection with others. However, this desire is complicated by a desire to also remain separate once we have taken up an identity in society. We paradoxically desire to remain together and else simultaneously. For complete connection with the world and with others would mean the dissolution of the self, whereas rigid protection of the self cuts the individual off from dynamic participation in life. At both extremes of these modes of existence we face a death-like state: dissolution of the self is a kind of annihilation, and rigid protection is a kind of stasis. The movement of human being is caught in a perpetual tension between an outflowing and ingathering dynamic flux. We hold ourselves together by repressing and sublimating a great deal of this energy.

However, in *Life against Death* Brown also offers reflection on how we might recuperate our connectedness with others and the world in an unrepressed way. This can be found in Brown's recovery of the richness of Freud's definition of human sexuality. As Brown makes clear, Freud's definition of the sexual instinct is indeed very broad. Brown states, "The sexual instinct is the energy or desire with which the human being pursues pleasure" (p. 26). Further, sexuality, in Freudian terms, is a total experience, including all interior and exterior sensations of the human body. Sexuality, understood in this way, envelops one's capacity to absorb love and to pursue an erotic connection with others. Considering the breadth of this definition of sexuality, we can see that infants, who are not yet restricted by the reality-principle, are able to indulge in a very rich sexual life. In fact, Brown argues that if we follow Freud's definition, we come to understand that infants have richer sexual lives than adults since infants are fully absorbed in their bodies. "Infantile sexuality is the pursuit of pleasure obtained through the activity of any and all organs of the human body. So defined, the ultimate essence of our desires and our being is nothing more or less than delight in the active life of all the human body" (p. 30). This full-body sexual pleasure and delight then becomes narrowed to genital sexuality in adulthood. Thus, as Freud's theory asserts, sexuality does not simply appear in puberty, but rather has continuity with the "life instinct" and pleasure principle. Adult sexuality, then, can be understood as a controlled and reduced version of infantile sexuality. This narrowing of sexuality coordinates with the acceptance of the reality-principle, namely curbing the Dionysian pursuit of pleasure and accepting the procreative function of sexual activity. The excess of the fullness of sexuality experienced in childhood must then be discarded and repressed; it must be desexualized and sublimated into socially functional activities. These discarded elements, from the adult perspective, are judged to be perverse since they are disruptive to social order and to the executive functions of the ego. Thus Brown refers to infantile sexuality as "polymorphous perverse": an unbounded and unordered experience of pleasure throughout the whole self. These "'perverse' components of infantile sexuality [...] include the pleasure of touching, of seeing, of muscular activity, and even the passion for pain" (p. 30). As much as the polymorphous perverse is not a socially acceptable form of pleasure it remains an excess of energy within us. It is with dis-ease that we accept the drastically narrowed formulation of sexuality or pleasure in adulthood. This excess of energy must then remain repressed or be sublimated into socially and culturally acceptable modes of expression. The implication of this is that all humans are at least somewhat neurotic since we all must repress some of the polymorphous perverse in order to get along in the social world.

However, in *Life against Death* Norman Brown is actually interested in facing the question of how humans might live an unrepressed life, that is, examining the conditions under which humans might stop being unhappy. Brown points out two marked places where something of the wholeness of infantile sexuality can be captured once again. The first is found in the experience of childhood play. In play, children experience activity which is meaningful and pleasurable but which is not ordered toward a specific aim. Time in childhood play is not experienced as ordered and linear (as it is in, say, adult labour) but rather as unbounded, and is marked by cycles and repetitions. Children can repeat the same activity with the same delight for prolonged periods, and the pleasure remains immersive. As Brown argues, “Play is ‘purposeless yet in some sense meaningful.’ It is the same thing if we say that play is the erotic mode of activity. Play is that activity which, in the delight of life, unites man with the objects of his love” (pp. 32-33).

Here, the phenomenological description of play found in Hans-Georg Gadamer’s *Truth and Method* (Gadamer, 1989) is helpful in filling out this articulation of the importance of play in connecting meaningfully with that which is outside of ourselves. In *Truth and Method* Gadamer contributes a philosophical approach to hermeneutics the details of which we certainly do not have space to engage with at this point. However it is worth noting that his description of play is key to his philosophy of interpretation since play is a mode of being which offers the possibility to overcome the subject/object divide. Gadamer’s phenomenological study of play flows as follows: play is not serious, yet someone who does not take the game seriously is a spoilsport. Play has no goal, but rather is constantly renewed in repetition. Play itself offers primacy over the consciousness of the player, in that one becomes entirely lost and absorbed in the game. The to-and-fro movement of play is taken on without strain, where one is “free from the burden of taking initiative” (p. 105). And so, in playing, the player is taken over by the game, which is also the attraction of the game. The subject of the game, then, is not the player, but the game itself. Individual subjectivity is suspended in the movement of the play. In the case of play, one plays *something* out of *wanting* to play a particular game rather than another. In the game one still has a role and tasks to perform, but these are unburdened from purpose and function other than to perpetuate the play (as opposed to, say, the tasks of paid employment). In the game, the play “presents” the achievement of the players’ tasks, but freed from any purpose beyond the game, this becomes an act of playing oneself out, a “self-presentation” within the closed field or structure of the game. “Play is really limited to presenting itself. Thus its mode of being is self-presentation” (p. 108). It is in this mode of being that the concept of play

becomes significant for the work of art. In both play and art, we encounter the presentation of something for someone which occurs within a closed field, unburdened from serving a function beyond its field.

Returning to Norman Brown, we note that he also makes a strong connection between the modes of experience engaged in play and in art. Indeed, Brown argues that in addition to the full pleasure of childhood play, this reconnection with the “polymorphous perverse” mode of pleasure is also accessible to adults through the experience of artworks. The drive toward life or Eros is correlated with Freud’s notion of primary process thinking which also links to the experience encountered through art. The primary processes are unconscious, associational forms of thinking, which are not bound by the either/or logic which regulates the executive secondary process thinking of the ego. As Brown states,

The technique of art, so radically different from the technique of science and rational discourse, is rooted in what Freud called the primary process – the procedures of the unconscious which, Freud insists, are radically different from the logical procedures of the conscious system, and which, though in this sense illogical, are nevertheless in their own way meaningful and purposive (Brown, 1959, p. 55).

Through the experience of artworks, adults regain the possibility of participating in an activity which is meaningful, but which does not stand within the bounds of ordered regulated time nor become capitalized by a rationalized teleology of progress. The *materiality* of an embodied encounter with an artwork is also key to regaining this experience of the fullness of connected pleasure. As Brown points out, “Art differs from dreaming not only because it makes the unconscious conscious – a purely cognitive relation – but also because it liberates repressed instincts – a libidinal relation” (p. 63). Thus the materiality of experiencing artworks is extremely important in order to reconnect with the excess of pleasure, the polymorphous perverse. Dreaming and fantasy are not enough; the drives, which are rooted in the body, must find bodily and material release. Thus Brown argues, against Freud, that art cannot be considered in the same category as dreams and fantasies since dreams and fantasies remain “substitutes for forbidden pleasures” (p. 65). Artworks, on the other hand, are able to catch us up in an immersive relation with the excess of polymorphous perverse pleasure.

The distinction between a cognitive relation and a libidinal relation is very helpful when considering the experience of artworks. There is a sense in which artworks refuse to simply be *about* something, refuse strictly cognitive relations, and also actually assert meaning through libidinal relations. Through the way in which artworks can engage meaningfully with our perceptual and affective faculties in addition to our cognitive faculties, we can actually engage

in a polymorphous mode of pleasure which is also meaningful. Further, the meaningfulness of the artwork must come through an embodied experience of being situated with artwork itself; a description of the artwork can never substitute for the experience nor completely summarize its meaning. In this way artworks enable us to reconnect with the excess of pleasure, the polymorphous perverse, rather than repress it.

Thus through Brown's recovery of Freud's characterization of the polymorphous perverse not only do we begin to gain further understanding of the human need for togetherness, but we also begin to see how we might again bond with that which has become wholly "other" to ourselves. Our entry into the world as infants completely dependent on others creates in us a deep need and capacity for a life-giving, erotic connection with others. Further, through Brown's consideration of our experience of artworks, we come to understand the importance of the materiality of experience in reconnecting with the excess of pleasure discarded from infancy. But working through this questioning of the source of our longing for togetherness and coming up against the question of the materiality of experience has also led us to a sense of how we connect with "elsewhere" and extend beyond the strict bounds of ourselves. Both in the making and experience of artworks we are creatively able to live out the excess which is repressed under the reign of the reality principle within individuals as well as within culture.

This phenomenon also finds resonance with Anton Ehrenzweig's articulation of scanning vision in his book *The Hidden Order of Art: A Study in the Psychology of Artistic Imagination* (Ehrenzweig, 1967). As Ehrenzweig argues, "unconscious scanning," which also functions according to the "logic" of primary process thinking, is actually able to handle more complex and open-ended situations than is the executive realm of secondary process thinking. As he states, "unconscious vision is thus proved to be capable of scanning serial structures and gathering more information than a conscious scrutiny lasting a hundred times longer" (p. 39). The primary processes are aligned with the id and can actually defy the executive secondary process thinking of the ego. Whereas there is no "no" in the unconscious, the ego is bound by either/or logic. Ehrenzweig's characterization of scanning vision, or dedifferentiated attention is one that is also able to handle "or-or" logic, a form of "logic" which tends to appear chaotic to conscious scrutiny, or surface vision. Unconscious scanning, then, is polyphonic, able to diffuse its array of attention and to take in a whole field of experience at once. This mode of attention, Ehrenzweig argues, is operational in the apprehension of artworks as well as all creative activity. The activity of play also helps illustrate his articulation of the workings of scanning vision, but according to Ehrenzweig the difference between playing games and creative activity is marked by the lack of preformed rules

governing creative activity. “No such limiting rules exist in creative work; it creates its own rules which may only be known after the work is finished” (p. 39). The temporality contained within this description of creative work is one in which we could say that the cause is *created* by the effect. Ehrenzweig demonstrates how any attempt to clearly visualize what lies ahead actually inhibits creative activity as well as creative engagement with artworks. Citing the later Wittgenstein’s description of how we are able to grasp meaning “in a flash” without yet having all of the necessary definitions and detailed information to spell out that understanding, Ehrenzweig explicates the unique temporality of creative engagement. It is through this capacity to grasp the future permutations and uses of a word without rational precision that we are able to play what Wittgenstein calls the “language game.” Ehrenzweig extrapolates on this phenomenon by stating that “unconscious scanning – in contrast to conscious thought which needs closed gestalt patterns – can handle ‘open’ structures with blurred frontiers which will be drawn with proper precision only in the unknowable future” (Ehrenzweig, 1967, p. 42). That is, unconscious scanning is well equipped to handle, and in fact creatively thrives upon, instability, polyphony and complexity. And in this way it gathers the future into the present without reducing it to any one of its possible permutations or to prescribed analytic ideas.

For the creative individual, movement between unconscious scanning and secondary process thinking happens rather easily. But this experience can also be resisted by the ego’s insistence upon a clear and narrow focus of attention. As Ehrenzweig describes,

the disruption of consciousness is hardly felt. The momentary absence of mind will be forgotten as the creative mind returns to the surface with newly won insight. If however the surface faculties react with defensive rigidity and insist on judging the contents of dedifferentiation from their own restricted focus, then the more scattered, broadly based imagery of low-level visualization impresses us as vague and chaotic (p. 35).

Thus the surface faculties of secondary process thinking are not only ill equipped to engage with creative work, but can also defensively repress these experiences. Here I would like to offer that the experience of chaos *as such* can, in light of Ehrenzweig’s thinking, be understood as a facet of repression. In this way, the labelling of certain experience as chaotic is a reaction of the secondary processes or the analytic faculties of cognition against that which it does not have the capacity to understand. What is gathered in the *present* through “unconscious scanning” is *future* for the conscious, rational mind. Another way of saying this is that rational thinking lags behind the embodied engagement in any given situation; there is a certain *pastness* which is characteristic of rational thought. In the experience of an artwork the pastness of

abstract thinking is not able to dominate, but can only begin to come to grips with the work by allowing its contributions to be led by the other regions of experience.

What the work of psychoanalytic theorists Norman Brown and Anton Ehrenzweig shows us is not only that we are bodies, but also that our embodied condition is integral to our intelligent connection with others and with the world. Further, the temporality involved in full engagement with what is other to ourselves is one which gives primacy to the present and to the local. Any sense of togetherness we experience in the elsewhere, though it may hold significance for us, is derivative of our embodied, polymorphous, experiences of togetherness. As we move forward with the development and design of digital technologies, we may want to gather the strength demonstrated by Norman Brown and again ask under what conditions humans might actually be able to become less rather than more repressed. I leave off with a few words from Luce Irigaray, “Little by little, we have lost the habit of looking at each other, of listening to each other, of touching each other, of perceiving each other. We have looked elsewhere, or we have remained in the night saying: I love you” (Irigaray, 2001, p. 99).

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