**Language Games and Private Language, Wizards and Witches**

**How a child with autism builds their emotional world – A psychoanalytic, philosophical, and literary view\***

This chapter follows the processes of how children with autism build their emotional world, seeking to uncover how the emotional world of children with autism is created and constructed, as there is currently a lacuna in knowledge about this question.

The seminal and groundbreaking body of literature on autism, which brought attention to the condition and led the way in helping to understand it, is mainly psychoanalytic.[[1]](#footnote-1) This literature focuses more on defensive and psychopathological processes and less on the processes of selfhood and the subjective world of children with autism.

In addition, the psychoanalytic literature is less inclined to address the linguistic difficulty of a child with autism and its impact on the child’s processes of building a subjective world and the child’s emotional experience. That is, most work in the field avoids addressing the question of how the lack of language, or the limited ability to use verbal language, as well as the difficulty in using “emotional language,” all influence the creation of the subjective emotional world.

In this chapter, I will demonstrate that linguistic difficulty is of considerable importance in building the subjective emotional world of children with autism of varying levels of functioning. As a result of this difficulty, these children create their emotional worlds using alternative means, namely, using non-verbal languages, or by using unique linguistic patterns they learn from their surrounding environment. These languages sound like an echo of sentences and words that these children internalize within their own mental framework and use to construct their emotional world.

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In response to the fact that the literature dealing with autism has largely overlooked this issue of the linguistic elements of how a child with autism builds their inner world, this chapter applies an interdisciplinary approach in its analysis. Today, interdisciplinarity occupies an important place in the debate as to how knowledge is created.[[2]](#footnote-2) In her article “Interdisciplinarity” in the book *Outside the Lines: Issues in Interdisciplinary Research* Liora Salter proposes different principles that she thinks should serve as a guide for adopting an interdisciplinary approach in research.[[3]](#footnote-3) For Salter, an interdisciplinary approach is recommended when there is sense in the scientific community that a specific issue has been neglected over the years, or that the methodology or perspective of a certain research approach fails to answer the questions arising during the study. Salter further advises an interdisciplinary approach when scholars have long felt overly constrained, as she puts it, by the boundaries of their discipline or the study methods they use, and when they feel that these disciplinary boundaries limit their research direction or do not enable them to answer the study questions.

The study of autism would appear to be in a similar state to that described by Salter. Indeed, the effort to understand the inner world of a person with autism, and that person’s selfhood and emotional experience, has been neglected over the years. Instead, emphasis has been given to the psychopathological processes characterizing the condition. The current approaches, mainly psychoanalytic and cognitive, constrains the scholars, in Salter’s language, and does not enable them to expand their study into such areas as the creation of selfhood and the particular, subjective experience of the individual, which could shed light on the inner world of a child with autism, and thus help us also to understand that child and find ways to enter this world and acquire greater knowledge and understanding.

This chapter is divided into two parts. The first part focuses focus on the processes of selfhood and the emotional world of the child with autism who has not developed verbal language, and hardly uses verbal language for communicating with the environment. This discussion will refer to the philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein, who gave a lot of attention to the issue of selfhood and a person’s emotional world, as well as to the place of language in these processes.

The second part of the chapter will deal with the creation of the inner world of children with autism who have developed a verbal language, but who face difficulty in using “emotional language,” namely, to use language to express emotions and share their emotional inner world with others. For this analysis, I will draw from the discipline of literature, showing that children with autism who speak use literature in a unique manner that helps them construct their emotional world. The focus will be on examining the use these children make of the fairytale genre, a genre to which they are especially attracted. I seek to demonstrate that due to the unique characteristics of the fairytale, some of which exist also in the inner worlds of children with autism, these children are attracted to this genre, seeing within it an expression of their own inner worlds. In addition, I will show that autistic children find within the universal conflicts manifested in fairytales an expression of their own unique conflict.

**“To imagine a language means to imagine a form of life” – Ludwig Wittgenstein’s contribution to understanding the world of a non-speaking child with autism**

Drawing on the philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein, this section explores the process of how a child with autism, who has not developed a verbal language, constructs their emotional world. First, we begin with a discussion of what is referred to in the literature as the “Late Wittgenstein” period, to ascertain this particular school of thought’s contribution to our understanding of how children with autism construct their subjective emotional world and their self.

One of the central themes in Wittgenstein’s philosophy is language and its place in constructing an individual’s consciousness. According to him, it is language, chiefly its use by people, that creates a form of life. The decision to apply Wittgenstein’s philosophy to the question of the world of the non-speaking child with autism is directly connected both to the emphasis placed in his writing on language, dialogue, and usage as the pillars for the construction of consciousness and the experience of selfhood and the world, and to the issues that preoccupied him, mainly in the periods referred to as “the Late Wittgenstein Period” or the “Third Wittgenstein Period” – states of consciousness and the clarification of psychological terms reflecting the core of the inquiry in this chapter.

**Rule and use**

The first time the subject of obeying a rule in *Philosophical Investigations*[[4]](#footnote-4) appears when Wittgenstein writes about a series of numbers and asks what determines that the correct continuation of the series 2, 4, 6 is 8, or what determines that the rule here is to add 2 to each number? Numerous scholars, including Bar-Elli[[5]](#footnote-5) and Kripke[[6]](#footnote-6) claim that this involves a material rather than a causative question. That is, the question is not how we know that the answer is 8 and not 10, for example, as in that case, the answer would be causative: if until now, on each occasion I have added 2 to the last number, then now, too, I should do so. Rather, the question is a material one and relates to a much more profound issue: What determines the actual establishment of the rule, the very act of obeying a rule? Or in the words of Wittgenstein: “But how can a rule show me what I have to do at this point?”[[7]](#footnote-7)

Kripke[[8]](#footnote-8) claims that at this point, Wittgenstein stresses the issue of the normativity of action that accords with the rule. For him, this is what determines an action as being correct, and in accordance with the rule, or as being incorrect and not in accordance with the rule. The rule creates a norm and determines future uses: “But I don’t mean that what I do now...determines the future use causally and as a matter of experience, but that in a queer way, the use itself is in some sense present.”[[9]](#footnote-9) In other words, there is a norm, a convention, that causes uses of the rule, a social convention that is common to the form of life of human beings.

Wittgenstein places tremendous emphasis on the link between **rule and use** and it appears that one inspires the other. For Wittgenstein, the rule is determined to a large extent by the meaning created when using it, and the use of the rule is what creates the meaning of the rule. In any event, this is a rule with social meaning. He emphasizes the issue of the correct social agreement also in relation to the rule: “So you are saying that human agreement decides what is true and what is false?” It is what human beings say that is true and false: however, they agree in the language they use. That is not agreement in opinions but in form of life.”[[10]](#footnote-10)

In this paragraph too, emphasis is placed on the agreement and the common form of life that enables the establishment of the rule. Therefore, Wittgenstein raises a question: “Is what we call “obeying a rule” something that it would be possible for only one man to do, and to do only once in his life? It is not possible that there should have been only one occasion on which someone obeyed a rule. It is not possible that there should have been only one occasion on which a report was made, an order given or understood; and so on. To obey a rule, to make a report, to give an order, to play a game of chess, are customs (uses, institutions).”[[11]](#footnote-11) And he continues: “And hence also ‘obeying a rule’ is a practice. And to think one is obeying a rule is not to obey a rule. Hence it is not possible to obey a rule ‘privately’: otherwise thinking one was obeying a rule would be the same thing as obeying it.”[[12]](#footnote-12) Namely, an individual cannot obey a rule that only he or she can understand or obey a rule without relating to the world in which they are situated and without there being an external custom or criterion for readiness to obey.[[13]](#footnote-13) As in the example of Wittgenstein: “As things are, I can, for example, invent a game that is never played by anyone. But would the following be possible too: mankind has never played any games; once, however, someone invented a game – which no one ever played?”[[14]](#footnote-14) In other words, it is possible to invent a game even if nobody ever plays it, as mankind knows what a game is, is cognizant of the existing regularity of games etc. In contrast, to invent a game in a given situation in which mankind does not know what a game is would be a pointless exercise, as the background, the form of life, lack the requisite regularity and order for such a game to have meaning.

This example illustrates the fact that in any given situation there can be no private rule and the rule must relate to the social form of life in which it exists. Even if we do not use the rule, but this rule takes into account this form of life and relates to its praxis, it may still be a rule, but not in a situation in which the form of life does not include this type of rule.

What, then, is the connection between a child with autism and following the rule? The term “rule” used by Wittgenstein can prove very enlightening when investigating autistic experience. Wittgenstein claims that obeying and following the rule are functions that guide human behavior. According to him, use of a rule does not merely constitute obeying a social convention; rather, the very act of use attributes meaning to the rule. Use is what establishes the rule and creates its meaning so that a certain form of life is then made possible. Social rules are learned from the very beginning of life. A newly born baby is not yet familiar with the social rules, but gradually, its integration into the social environment and the very fact of its social orientation enables it to learn the rules.

Another term of Wittgenstein’s relevant to our discussion is “**language games,**” with the emphasis on language games being the interaction. Language is learned by interaction between people and during use. Namely, Wittgenstein claims that the basis for the development of verbal language is the simple language games: the clear and transparent activity that we watch during primitive language games or games played among children. This is what will enable us to better understand the use of the verbal expressions in the future. More complex forms of language are formed based on this.

Wittgenstein places great emphasis on the instinctive basis on which language is constructed, positing that non-verbal language games form the basis of what later develops into verbal language games, and therefore, they must be in harmony with each other. Wittgenstein explains that this involves the remnants of instinctive, primitive, and natural behavior whose sincerity and authenticity are beyond doubt, and this will help us later on to build more conventional linguistic behavior.

The concept of “language games” as we have seen is based on two central pillars and people with autism lack both of these. These pillars are: the preverbal instinctive basis on which the verbal language games are based that will develop later on, and the social interaction that enables the language games to take place. These two factors either do not exist at all or are extremely uncommon among people with autism, and this is the main reason, according to Wittgenstein, why language games do not develop within a person with autism, or fewer language games will develop among them than among those who are ordinary. Consequently, according to this way of thinking, those with autism will encounter difficulty in conducting a form of life similar to that of ordinary children. Wittgenstein explains that this results from the fact that language games both enable and create forms of life. Social orientation is a necessity for language games to exist. There must be orientation towards the environment – and as we have seen, to a large extent, orientation is something lacking among people with autism.

Today, there is a strong body of evidence to support the proposition that from early infancy, children with autism encounter difficulty with simple, interactive games with their mother. Those prelinguistic games to which Wittgenstein referred, such as games of turns, games of smiles, and shared gestures will not appear among them, or will be much less common.[[15]](#footnote-15)

One of the criteria today for diagnosis of autism from a very early age is the lack of the use of gestures, or what is referred to in the professional jargon as a lack of prelinguistic communication. Early diagnosis of autism is to a large extent based on, among other things, the difficulty in using early gestures at a very young age, such as pointing and joint attention.[[16]](#footnote-16) The ability to use gestures exists almost from birth, and the use of them is made immediately and instinctively, just as Wittgenstein mentioned many years earlier in his reference to non-verbal language games. It is thus apparent that language is not learned by a person with autism in the same way that language is learned by a person without autism, and it does not contain language games and a social context, and, as such, the language of a speaking person with autism is replete with quotes and repetitive patterns, lacking appropriate gestures and intonation. It is for precisely this reason that people with autism often tend to adopt an idiosyncratic language.

Wittgenstein refers to this issue in *Philosophical Investigations*: “Well, let’s assume the child is a genius and itself invents a name for the sensation!— But then, of course, he couldn’t make himself understood when he used the word...what was its purpose? When one says, ‘He gave a name to his sensation,’ one forgets that a great deal of stage-setting in the language is presupposed if the mere act of naming is to make sense.”[[17]](#footnote-17)

And indeed, as we have already seen, people with autism have a tendency to adopt idiosyncratic language, and they tend to invent words and names that do not exist, and which are known only to them. The very fact that their parents are likely to understand them transforms this language into a language that is not private but is still idiosyncratic. It appears that the tendency to use idiosyncratic language is connected precisely to the lack indicated by Wittgenstein – that “stage-setting” that is connected to the language games, conventions, and norms regarding the language, and eventually the communication processes in which people with autism are less involved. The actual use of an idiosyncratic language underscores the fact that words in a language for people with autism are not necessarily intended for the purpose of communication and are not necessarily part of the existing language games among people without autism. This might also explain the specificity, the difficulty in understanding metaphors and humor that also characterize autistic language. The ability to understand all these is related to what Wittgenstein terms “stage-setting” in language, namely complex processes of language games through which the child learns and acquires the use of language, the nuances of the different words, the musicality of the language and the experience of its meaning. In the absence of all these, the reference to language is specific. The words express one limited picture, the reference is literal-verbal and there is difficulty in understanding the context in which the word is uttered or in which the use of humor is made.

Moreover, the preverbal instinctive capabilities are merely the first stage in the language games. These capabilities are only the first condition for establishing the language games and the accompanying form of life. Later, a more complex capacity for mutual interaction is required, one in which a person acquires the understanding of words, concepts, thoughts, and emotions – all via these games. Wittgenstein claims that within human experiences of all kinds, the emotional and social worlds are all learned using these games. Wittgenstein stresses that during the language games, it is not only the language itself that is learned, but the entire human experience.

Indeed, when we begin investigating language acquisition among children with autism, we discover that a significant part of the language is learned by them by passively by watching television series, movies, computer games, etc. Many children with autism spend hours upon hours exposed to all of these. They show less of an interest in interaction with other people, they are less involved in language games, and people are less a subject of interest for them than screens; therefore, they learn the language in this manner rather than via language games. Consequently, as they tend to be blessed with a good memory, they often quote from the screens. They learn complete word patterns, often including the intonation and accent of the people to whom they have been exposed by viewing the screen. This is a rigid and repetitive language, predictable and lacking creativity, and its method of study does not involve language games or any interaction. As such, no understanding of the intention of meaning and learning form of life takes place. This is one of the key reasons why, if we use the terms and world view of Wittgenstein, the form of life of people with autism is so different from that of ordinary people.

Notwithstanding these behaviors, do people with autism play any language games? It seems that despite the rigidity and repetitiveness of the autistic language, it may be reasonable to assume that the use of quotes and of a patterned and repetitive language might be a type of language game unique to people with autism; possibly a less creative, flexible, and spontaneous language game compared with the language games of people without autism, but nevertheless, possibly in their own unique manner, people with autism might use quotes in a certain way that could be considered a type of language game.

Thus, for example, Matan, a three-year-old child with autism whom I was treating, and hardly spoke, would quote a lot from a poem his mother used to read to him. He used to say, “Oh, how sorry I am sorry, Oh, how bitter, I am bitter.” These statements that he would say sounded as though they were lacking any communicative intentions and were somewhat strange, but during the sessions, Matan’s mother and I began to notice that he would utter this sentence in situations of hardship and frustration. We gained the impression that he was trying to say something, but as his language is not spontaneous and he is not able to use it in a communicative manner and play language games with it as other children do, he would use structured quotes he had acquired to express an idea of communicative meaning.

Observing this statement led to an insight that there is indeed a rule and there is a certain degree of repetition of this sentence, as mentioned above, mainly in relation to anger and frustration. Our response to this statement as a language game in which the child is in fact trying to tell us that he is said or angry, led to responses relating to the emotional experience. When Matan used to utter this quote, we would say: “Oh how sad you are,” or “Oh, how angry you are,” etc. Gradually, and after we repeatedly used these sentences relating to Matan’s feelings and emotions, Matan learned to use these expressions himself. At the beginning he would say, “How sad you are” and “How angry you are”; in other words, he used to repeat what we said echolalically, but later he learned to speak in the first person, too, in order to utter this sentence. Thus, once the response to Matan’s statements was that of an interactive language game and the response to what was said was a statement of communicative meaning (precisely as a mother attributes communicative meaning to the utterances of her baby), this once structured and lifeless quote became a mutual language game.

Yehuda, a child from an ultra-Orthodox Jewish family who was diagnosed as suffering from autism, also used to quote from biblical sources: “Save us, we beseech you, O Lord!” (Psalms 118) all the time. He would also simply utter this expression, rather than using it as part of a mutual language game. But here too, Yehuda uttered this statement only in certain situations, mainly those of fear and anxiety. After the rule behind the use of this quote was understood, I began to relate to this saying as a type of language game and to respond to it as a language game. Gradually, Yehuda began to replace this patterned sentence with statements such as “I am afraid” or “I don’t want Mommy to go,” etc.

Even with regard to children with high-functioning autism, taking a close look at the “language games” of these children reveals that something in the interaction, the reciprocity and the play itself, is lacking. Children with high-functioning autism find it difficult to conduct a two-way conversation. They mainly encounter difficulty with the pragmatic aspects of the conversation that are fundamentally so instinctive in nature, and which also exist in the non-verbal language games. They find it difficult to speak in turn, to shift from the position of speaker to that of listener, and they encounter difficulty using the appropriate language for their interlocutor and often use language that is too high or not appropriate. They also have difficulty talking about a topic of conversation that is also of interest to their interlocutor, tending to talk only about what interests them. Their body language and eye contact are not appropriate. They encounter difficulty playing language games and, in essence, their language games do not match the social environment in which they live and the form of life they conduct. Many people with autism refer to themselves as feeling, for example, like an anthropologist on Mars, as Temple Grandin put this,[[18]](#footnote-18) as if they live on a different planet. Essentially, they are not familiar with the form of life on this planet and fail to understand it. In this context, the link between language games and the form of life of which Wittgenstein speaks becomes clearer. Due to their inability to play language games, people with autism experience difficulty in understanding the language and the nuances of the words, the correct use of words, the complexity of the experience and the intended meaning of the words, and this hampers their ability to integrate in the form of life of their world.

What is the implication of these findings and insights for the purposes of treatment? It appears that above all, Wittgenstein’s conceptualization of the language games teaches us just how important the spontaneous, daily context is in which these language games occur. Wittgenstein is really encouraging us to engage in mutual, spontaneous language games in social contexts, rather than learning the language in a technical and theoretical fashion. For the language game to be a game as such, it must be played in a social context as an interesting element common to both parties who seek to play that game. The language may be learned only in this manner, and it is only in this manner that children learn to use the various words in the correct manner. These words gradually accumulate and become charged with the relevant emotional meaning for the form of life of the environment in which they live. According to this approach, any attempt to teach the language in a manner that is not part of a game, and does not involve interest and genuine reciprocity, is doomed to failure. It depletes the language of its emotional meaning and reinforces the behavioral pattern of relating to the words as objects and to the language as an object; this, then, is a tendency among people with autism as, we have seen.

**Little Mermaid and Peter Pan, Mowgli and Sleeping Beauty – How does the child with autism construct their emotional world using fairy tales?**

Up to this point, the discussion has centered mainly on the construction of selfhood and the subjective emotional world of the non-speaking child with autism. This section of the chapter will investigate how the speaking child with autism constructs its world through literature. The starting point of the discussion is that children with autism, mainly high-functioning children, tend to be captivated by certain literary genres, such as works of science fiction and fairy tales, and on occasion, works that combine a number of such genres.

The therapeutic effect of literary works has been well-known for a long time.[[19]](#footnote-19) Early psychoanalytic approaches, led by Ernest Jones, as the successor of Freud in relating to literary work from a psychoanalytic point of view,[[20]](#footnote-20) and later Bruno Bettelheim,[[21]](#footnote-21) who created an orderly doctrine about the place of the fairy tales in a child’s mental development, attributed a highly significant psychological role to stories and fairy tales in the construction of the child’s emotional world.

If fairy tales do indeed have a primary psychological role to play in this context, then as far as the child with autism is concerned, this role assumes even greater importance. As “forbidden conflicts between secret wishes and the demands of society,” as Bettelheim defines it, which have universal meaning and which according to him exist in every child, are of particular and unique meaning for the child with autism. The child with autism must contend not only with conflicts between the id and the ego, which are the fate of all children undergoing socialization processes. The profound and most difficult of all the conflicts, one accompanied by a threat of destruction, would appear to be the conflict between the desire to come into contact with the human world and that child’s need to defend themselves from the terrible dread, the fear of destruction and annihilation that threatens it, when it decides to relinquish the layers of defense that guard it from this world.

Autism, as observed by Tustin, one of the pioneers of research into the condition, “is a primal mechanism that operates as a response to the most primary terror, which derives from the sudden awareness of bodily separatedness from a suckling mother…which occurs before a baby has sufficient tools to contend with it.”[[22]](#footnote-22)

The conflict of the child with autism is thus a conflict of much more threatening intensity than the conflict of an “ordinary” child. The conflict holds the utmost significance for survival, and the threat the child with autism experiences is an existential threat. The fairy tale genre, which by nature appears to incline toward intensifying the conflicts and, on occasions, assign them a monstrous dimension, reflects the emotional experience of the child with autism. This might also be the reason why the fairy tale sometimes continues to accompany such a child even in those developmental stages when an ordinary child will abandon the fairy tale for more realistic stories. The fairy tale thus continues to reflect the profound inner conflict of the child with autism, sometimes for many years. It appears that the intensity of the anxieties on the one hand and the difficulty in gaining help from characters in the external world on the other, make the inner world of children with autism much more threatening than that of regular children; hence their considerable attraction to fairy tales.

Consider, for example, Hans Christian Andersen’s fairy tale *The Little Mermaid*, which was adapted into a Disney movie.[[23]](#footnote-23) This fairy tale recounts the story of the king of the sea’s daughter who falls in love with a mortal, but who is unable to realize this love because she is not a mortal and has no legs. Left with no choice, she turns to the witch who agrees to prepare a potion for her that will turn her fishtail into a pair of legs, so that she might appear like any other human. However, the witch warns the mermaid that each step she takes will hurt “like walking on sharp knives.” Moreover, in return for the potion, the witch asks for the mermaid’s wonderful voice. The implication of this is that the mermaid will become a mute. The mermaid’s father and family are opposed to taking this step, and even threaten to sever their ties with her, but the mermaid eventually consents to the witch’s terms. As in any fairy tale, this one too has a happy ending: the prince falls in love with the mermaid after she turns into a human being and the mermaid makes peace with her father and receives her voice back.

It appears that this fairy tale, to a large extent, broaches issues related to adolescence, rebelling against a father figure, leaving the family nest, and the search for an independent life. In the spirit of the psychoanalytic approaches, these are the underlying unconscious conflicts in this fairy tale. However, from the point of view of the child with autism, there are additional components and other unconscious conflicts in this fairy tale that are particularly relevant, and it is no surprise that, as we shall see below, it is precisely this fairy tale that helped a child with low-functioning autism to start speaking.

In his book *Life Animate*,[[24]](#footnote-24) which was adapted into a documentary film that was translated into Hebrew as *Hahayim-Seret Metsuyar* or *Life is an Animated Movie*, Ron Suskind talks about his son Walter. Walter, who was a child with autism, loved the movie *The Little Mermaid* and used to watch it time and again. When at a later stage he learned how to master use of the video machine, he would rewind the movie back to the point where the witch demands that the mermaid giver her voice to her. Only after constant listening, time after time, to this scene from the movie, did Walter’s mother notice the similarity between the witch’s words “Just your voice” and the word that Walter used to constantly repeat “Juicervose.” And only after the mother repeated aloud the words “Just your voice” a number of times and witnessed Walter’s ecstatic response and the immense joy he expressed due to the fact that his mother finally understood what he was saying, did the parents understand that this entire time, Walter had been trying to share with them his difficulty in speaking, his difficulty in sharing his voice with them.

Later on, the father describes how use was made of this animated movie as a means of forging a connection between Walter and his parents: Walter’s father, Ron, would speak in the voice of the characters from the movies, Walter would then answer him in the voice of another character, and thus an initial dialogue began to develop between them. One of the pinnacles of both the book and the documentary is when Walter, at a slightly older age, but at a stage when he is not yet talking, appears sad and withdrawn on his birthday. When his father tries to understand why he is sad, Walter succeeds in expressing a sentence: “I don’t want to grow up, just like Peter Pan.”

Walter’s story would seem to be an inspiring illustration of just how fairy tales can help a child with autism to express their inner conflicts. Walter kept returning to that part in the fairy tale/movie that was clearly strongly connected to his own inner conflict, which at this stage he was completely unaware of. In a similar vein, the mermaid’s dilemma of whether or not to give up her voice to obtain human legs that are not necessarily appropriate for her (“every step you take on land will be like walking on sharp knives”) echoes the conflict: children with autism also have to contend with many painful efforts and concessions in order to adapt themselves to the world around them and the demands of society. This fairy tale does seem to symbolically reflect these difficulties: in order to become a human, the mermaid is required to leave behind her safe world under the sea, to leave her overly-protective father and to face the sharp knives she will have to walk on. For a child with autism, this fairy tale may, to a significantly extent, symbolize the anxiety involved in the process of separation and the dread of being cut off and having to cope with the world, which, according to Tustin lies at the heart of the autistic anxieties and defense mechanisms.

Namely, for the child with autism, this fairy tale might indeed reflect an unconscious inner conflict, not necessarily the universal conflict to which Bettelheim refers, but a particular, unique conflict of their own. By using the fairy tale and focusing on the repeated sentence, Walter tried to say something, without being able to do so directly, about the significance of the lack of a voice and the need for an inner voice. He used the fairy tale’s voice for this purpose and, in this case, it truly functioned as his mouth in the literal sense of the word.

Another story in a similar fairy tale spirit, which also portrays a similar conflict and might also reflect the spirit of the psychoanalytic approach that relates to the fairy tale as an expression of unconscious conflicts, is the *Jungle Book*. The *Jungle Book* is not a classic fairy tale, nor is it part of a collection of fairy tales, such as that of the Brothers Grimm, Perrault, or Hans Christian Andersen, but it is replete with motifs that also appear in fairy tales. The story takes place in a remote and undefined location, in the jungle. In the story, unrealistic and imaginary events occur, such as animals who talk, dance, and sing, and a child who talks with animals, and throughout the tale there are constant battles between good and evil. Good defeats evil and the story concludes with a happy ending.

The protagonist in the fairy tale is Mowgli, a young boy who was raised in the jungle by animals and who faces many dangers that are represented by the character of the evil tiger Shere Khan, who constantly seeks to beleaguer him. He has two friends: an easygoing, cheerful and goodhearted bear named Baloo, who teaches Mowgli the pleasures of the jungle, along with a constantly concerned and overly level-headed and cautious panther called Bagheera, who assumes the responsibility for returning Mowgli to the Man Village. Mowgli, who is not eager to return to human society, is captivated by the jolly bear Baloo, who is both full of joie de vivre but also highly irresponsible, and follows him around. Eventually, due to his love for his female mirror image, a young girl he sees in the Man Village, Mowgli agrees to return to the village. The height of the conflict occurs when Mowgli is torn between two worlds, as Baloo pulls him by the hand and tries to tempt him to return with him to the jungle, while the young girl uses her seductive charms to go after her, until he finally chooses to return to life among people and follows the girl.

It appears that this fairy tale too, in a similar manner to the *Little Mermaid*, is one whose key material and profound issue for a child with autism is that of separation, giving up your inner world, exposure, and abandoning the layers of protection. To a large extent, Mowgli is a child with autism. He lives in the jungle with animals, communicates with them, but has no contact with humans. But the jungle is no safe place to be. It is a place swarming with dangers threatening Mowgli and his very existence, just like the dangers experienced by the child with autism. He does have friends who protect him, but as long as he is in the jungle, he will have to cope with daily, existential dangers. Mowgli must leave the jungle. He must leave his autistic and cut-off world and make contact with humans, but he finds this extremely difficult to do. The anxieties of the jungle are threatening, but the separation is no less threatening. Separation from the inner world involves threats, but this is familiar and known, and the effort to contend with the threatening and frightening human world, the separation from the characters who look after him but who perpetuate his existence as a helpless child, lies at the fundamental base of the particular conflict of the child with autism in this tale, more than, for example, the conflict between the super ego and the id, which are also echoed in this story tale. A conflict between the id and the super ego, however, tends to characterize normative development, and many children with autism have not yet reached the developmental stage, which is characterized by this conflict, and tend to be more, as defined by Tustin,[[25]](#footnote-25) at a stage of conflict between withdrawal and avoidance of giving up protective layers and of going out into the world. This fairy tale might to a large extent reflect a particular conflict, despite its universal messages.

A further example is the story of Dean, which is somewhat similar to Walter’s story mentioned above. Dean was a child diagnosed with autism at the age of two. When Dean was seven years old, he developed a strong attraction to the story of *Peter Pan*, as rendered in the Walt Disney movie.[[26]](#footnote-26) At that time, Dean appeared younger than his actual age, as a toddler in a kindergarten, and his general conduct was that of a toddler. Although his verbal capabilities had noticeably improved since his diagnosis, and his communicative functioning appeared to have improved too, emotionally, Dean was rather naive and very childish, which did not correspond with his age. It is thus no surprise that Dean was highly attracted to the story of *Peter Pan*, the child who did not want to grow up.

Dean’s mother recounted that she remembered the precise moment when Dean “understood” from the story of *Peter Pan* that it was possible to remain a child forever. From that moment, Dean began to show great interest in this story. At the same time, Dean also developed an obsession regarding ages. He became extremely interested in my age and the ages of the other family members and would constantly repeat questions on this issue in a repetitive and ceremonial manner. He would inquire as to the age of every person he met and would compare the age of one person to that of other people. At the exact same time, a regression occurred in his behavior. He began to ask for his pacifier again, which he had given up long ago, and asked to go back to sleeping in his baby bed. Dean’s behavior was puzzling, the reason for this regression was not clear, nor was why he was so obsessed with the issue of age, although from the outset, there did seem to be a slight connection between these two phenomena.

Only after it was understood that Dean had begun to develop an obsession with the movie of *Peter Pan*, and only after he began to ask his mother if he, too, like Peter Pan could remain a child forever and not grow up, did it become apparent that Dean was preoccupied with the question of age, as he was afraid of growing up, and the regression to earlier stages of development was a manifestation of this anxiety. Thus, this was not a regression following a traumatic incident, or stress and anxiety as is often the case. This was a practical expression of Dean’s anxiety over separation and disconnection from his infancy and from the fusion with his mother, over giving up the autistic defensive mechanisms that swaddled him and shielded him from the world, and over breaking out of the autistic shell into the real world.

Only as a result of the understanding that Dean was attracted to the tale of *Peter Pan*, did both his mother and I as a therapist succeed in connecting between Dean’s obsession with ages, his sudden regressive behavior, and the profound conflict he had to contend with, as manifested in this fairy tale. Thanks to this insight, and based on the use of this fairy-like tale, along with the characters and events in it, Dean received an appropriate response to this conflict and these anxieties during the treatment, and subsequently they began to subside significantly, until they disappeared altogether and made way for other conflicts and anxieties.

It appears that in this tale too, alongside the fundamental universal element with which every child can identify – the fear of losing one’s childhood, the need to cope with the adult world, giving up the joys of life and satisfying the libidinal urges in favor of coping with daily life and the demands of the reality of the ego and the super ego – there is also a particular element to which Dean was magically attracted. The fear of growing up and maturing threatens the child with autism much more than it does the regular child. The threat to Dean of growing up was an issue of survival. Dean experienced this as a life and death struggle. To become an adult for him was almost equivalent to stopping living; therefore, he was so attracted to this tale, which gave him hope to remain a child. The attraction to the story of *Peter Pan* was thus not from the universal place, but from Dean’s extremely personal and particular place.

Yet another example is the story of Sandra, a beautiful, delicate, and dreamy girl, who was also a child with autism. The encounter with Sandra was somewhat reminiscent of an encounter with a fairy – daydreaming, not at all realistic, touching yet not touching. Sandra would enter the treatment room and hardly make any contact with me as her therapist or with her mother. She loved to dress up the dolls, to change their clothes; she kept herself busy mainly by playing with dolls and their accessories, shoes, bags, earrings, combing them, and constantly changing their hair styles. The game tended not to develop much beyond this and throughout the sessions, she hardly spoke, initiated communication, or responded to communication, but was deeply immersed in her actions.

Sandra was particularly fond of Walt Disney movies and at the time, for a good reason, she was attracted to the movie *Sleeping Beauty*.[[27]](#footnote-27) She even asked her mother if it were possible for somebody to get up after such a long sleep and open her eyes like the beauty in the story. Her mother, a nurse by profession, tried to talk to her about states of “getting up” and awakening, but Sandra constantly repeated the question in different variations, and developed an obsession for watching the movie. She would focus the movie on the scene in which Sleeping Beauty is sound asleep, she would then slowly forward it to the scene in which she wakes up and would repeat the question again and again. Her mother stopped answering her as she understood that no answer would satisfy her.

In one of our conversations, when Sandra was not present, the mother herself gained the insight: “She is just like Sleeping Beauty, my daughter... She sleeps all the time. It’s like she is waiting for someone to wake her... She herself is Sleeping Beauty... She sleeps standing up... Dreams... When will she wake up?”

Sandra did indeed resemble Sleeping Beauty to some extent, and her identification with the fairy tale was by no means a coincidence. She regarded Sleeping Beauty as her mirror image. The movie gave expression to a profound conflict of Sandra herself. The desire “to sleep,” to be cut off from the world, to withdraw within the shell and wrap herself in the autistic shell contrasted with the need to get up and get a hold of oneself. Similar to Dean and Walter who were afraid of growing up, of leaving behind their autistic world and being separated from it, Sandra was afraid of waking up forever. The fairy tale she chose provided a precise expression of this conflict. This was a particular conflict for Sandra.

In summary, the psychoanalytic approach underscores the place of the unconscious conflicts that appear in the fairy tales and their therapeutic effect on children in general. With regard to children with autism too, the fairy tale would also seem to touch upon unconscious conflicts, but not necessarily the universal conflicts that other children experience from the fairy tales. The great significance of the fairy tale and one of the reasons why it constitutes such an attraction for children with autism might well lie in the fact that it also succeeds in touching on their own, extremely personal and particular conflicts, and above all, the basic conflict that is connected with giving up the rigid autistic defenses for breaking out into the external world. The various examples presented show that the fairy tales chosen by the children in the case studies to a large extent reflect this basic conflict, and the fairy tale tells the story of the children with autism, their narrative, in their language, in a manner that reflects and echoes their innermost, secret conflicts.

**Summary**

The objective of this chapter was to illustrate how applying disciplines from the philosophy of language and literature might be of help when exploring the inner world of the non-speaking child with autism, as well as children who have developed verbal language, but who despite having done so, encounter difficulty in using emotional language and communicating with the environment.

The basic premise of the chapter is that today there is a lacuna in the study of autism, mainly in the attempt to understand precisely who the child with autism is, and what is going on in that child’s mind and inner world. This is accompanied by a gap in the literature, mainly the psychoanalytic literature, which deals less with the processes of selfhood and the subjective world of children with autism, and focuses more on defensive and psychopathological processes, despite its potential for contributing to the understanding autism and focusing attention on this world.

This chapter has applied interdisciplinary approaches in order to gain a better understanding of the inner world of the child with autism. It opened with examples of how the philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein, mainly the terms **rule, use, and language games**, might be able to offer insights into the world of the non-speaking child with autism and possibly even help therapists ascribe some tangibility to the child’s inner experience, even without words.

Wittgenstein claimed that obeying the rule and following the rule are what guide human behavior and endow it with meaning. For him, use of a rule does not merely constitute obeying a social convention; rather, the very act of use is what attributes meaning to the rule, thus enabling the existence of a certain form of life.

This discussion has also suggested that due to their lack of social orientation and interest in the social surroundings, children with autism do not learn the social rules and therefore do not gain sufficient experience with rules and the use of rules. As a result, they fail to learn and understand the form of life of the society in which they live. Moreover, we found that due to the inability to play language games, children with autism have trouble understanding the nuances of words, the correct use of words, the complexity of the experience and the intended meaning of words, and this has an adverse effect on their ability to understand and integrate in the form of life in the society in which they live.

These issues are of therapeutic significance due to the importance of the spontaneous, daily context in which obeying the rule, its use, and the language games occur. Wittgenstein is strongly encouraging us to engage in mutual, spontaneous language games in social contexts, rather than learning the language in a technical and theoretical fashion: for the language game to be as such, it must be played in a social context as an interesting part common to both parties who seek to play that game. The language may only be learned in this manner, and it is only in this manner that children learn to use the various words in the correct manner, and the words become charged with the relevant emotional meaning for the form of life of the environment in which they live. According to this approach, any attempt to teach the language in a manner that is not within the framework of a game, and does not involve interest and genuine reciprocity, is doomed to failure. It empties the language of its emotional meaning and reinforces the behavioral pattern of relating to the words as objects and to the language as an object, which is a pronounced a tendency among people with autism.

The second part of the chapter discussed efforts to investigate the emotional world of children with autism via the prism of fairy tales. Based on the premise that literature, and in this case fairy tales, should be able to help us understand what takes place in the inner world of a child with autism, this section explored the possibility that motifs from the fairy tales help that child to construct particular meaning in that child’s inner experience. We tried to show that the fairy tales touch on the basic conflict that is related to relinquishing the rigid autistic defenses for breaking out into the world outside. The various examples presented illustrate how the attraction of various children to different fairy tales helped them, their parents and their therapists better understand their profound inner conflict, as well as their secret anxieties and subjective experiences. This approach contrasts with that of simply viewing children with autism’s attraction to fairy tales and their repeated viewing of the related movies as repetitive, useless behavior. By trying to understand the deep, underlying meaning of the fairy tale for that specific child, it was possible to gain insights into that child’s world, often leading to a breakthrough in their therapy.

The chapter, examining two disciplines that have been applied less in the discussion on investigating and treating autism – philosophy and literature, and it tried to illustrate how specifically these disciplines might be able to shed light on those areas where there is a gap in the knowledge and understanding among the conventional disciplines about the true nature of the child with autism, thereby enabling us to understand just who the child in the room with us really is.

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