Free to Play: An Analysis in Aesthetic, Ethical, and Religious Movements

Heather C. Ohaneson

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

2013

ABSTRACT

Free to Play: An Analysis in Aesthetic, Ethical, and Religious Movements

Heather C. Ohaneson

In this dissertation, I investigate five forms of play with reference to freedom and constraint in order first to ascertain what relationship holds between play and liberty and then to see how the activity of play—and the attitude of playfulness—might contribute to a full and flourishing human life. To do so, I turn to an interdisciplinary set of figures, including Erik Erikson, Friedrich Schleiermacher, Blaise Pascal, Plato, and the contemporary scholars of improvisation Gary Peters and Danielle Goldman. It is my contention that the dialectical interrelation of liberty and limitation constitutes the essence of play and that the free engagement of constraints is a proper feature of *eudaimonistic* ethics. Instead of being regarded as a dispensable disposition, then, playfulness should be upheld alongside traditional virtues as a trait worthy of deliberate cultivation in adulthood.

Seeking to enact the claim that boundaries give rise to expansive possibility, I provide a firm structure for this study and organize my analysis according to Søren Kierkegaard's conceptions of the aesthetic, ethical, and religious spheres of existence. Liberty and limitation appear differently under each of these categories. Further, their forms change depending on whether they are viewed in light of children's play, videogames, gambling, puppetry, or improvisation, the iterations of play and playful identity under consideration in this study. Learning about the apprehension, negotiation, and appreciation of boundaries that occurs in play grants us a more nuanced understanding of play as a fundamental component of a good life. At the same time, this project affords the chance to reconsider the nature of freedom and constraint, and to reimagine what it means to be at liberty.

"I run in the path of your commands,

for you have set my heart free."

—Psalm 119:32

CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful for the generous and continual aid of my advisors, Wayne Proudfoot and Mark C. Taylor, and the different ways you model scholarship. Wayne, thank you for your steadfast support and patience. I am proud to be your student. Mark, I owe you special thanks because your seminar on Hegel and Derrida gave rise to this project in the spring of 2008. Your enthusiastic endorsement of the topic of play has been a source of encouragement for me along the way. I would like to thank the other members of the dissertation committee, Eric Gregory, Rachel Fell McDermott, and Katja Vogt. Your kindness and the carefulness of your thought are guiding examples for me. Thank you, Elizabeth Castelli and Celia Deutsch, for all of the ways you invested in me at Barnard College. Together, you helped set me on this path. I am honored to have learned from all of you and to continue benefiting from your wisdom.

Susie Andrews was a daily writing partner for a substantial part of this project. Thank you, Susie, for your faithfulness and understanding.

I owe thanks to my students who make me sharper, and my friends who make me gentler. Knarig Arabshian, and Lance and Michelle Rousseau Laytner, thank you for your deep friendship and abiding love. You are a blessing to me beyond measure. Armand Tcheklian, the player *par excellence*, I am grateful to you for showing me what joyful Christianity looks like. Alice Boone, knowing you is one of the great fortunes of my life. Shterna Wircberg Friedman, more than for reading and editing chapters of this work, I want to thank you for the years we have had of playing with ideas together. You bring such joy and freedom to me intellectually! Johanna Magin, your friendship has been a saving grace for me these last few years. There is no one with whom I would rather share a meal. Kate Kosloske Stricklan and Janessa Stream Graves, thank you for friendship that spans distance.

To my mother, Mary Kay Ohaneson,

without whom this would not have been possible,

and my great-grandmothers, Mary Dunigan and Ovsanna Peters,

for whom it would have been unthinkable

Introduction

One definition of play posits that it, like religion, is simultaneously separate from the everyday—we play but then we return to work—yet pervasive in our lives, histories, and cultures—the more we look, the more we see play: in ancient Greece and modern China, in children's education, in artistic creativity, in movies, in the sports psychology of "flow," in electronic games that we play in stolen moments on a host of technological devices, in animals, in the interpersonal dynamics of love and politics ("power plays"), and in our conflicting desires to maintain and lose control. Somehow play has seeped out, blurring its neat borders. In this, it resonates with common understandings of religion. Insofar as it is characterized as holy, religion delineates separate times and spaces for its exercise. Yet religion in its intensity can claim to be much more than an activity and can make demands on our attention and very selves. Religion and play may also on occasion be dismissed for similar reasons—they are criticized or rejected as too concerned with fantasy, merely escapist, not productive enough, corrupted in violent forms, or simply things we grow out of with age.

I am not concerned here to delineate the shortcomings of the phenomena of play and religion or even to offer a sustained discussion of the ways in which they overlap. Rather, in this dissertation I wish to engage the question of how the activity of play and the attitude of playfulness contribute to the well-lived human life. It is my contention that the concept of play has value for ethics, broadly construed as the discipline concerned with how we ought to live. Play is ethically instructive because experiences of play offer opportunities not only to find freedom from constraint but also, more strongly, to find freedom in constraint. Undergoing a theoretical investigation into the nature of play contributes to this effort of clarifying how play and playfulness may qualify as a *eudaimonistic* good and a virtue. Thus, I set out in what follows to provide a

dialectical treatment of play, showing how the dynamic interrelation of liberty and limitation constitutes a variety of games and amusements. Play, in this reading, is interplay, the back and forth of expansiveness and constriction.

Taking the existential categories of the nineteenth-century Christian Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard, I examine the concept of play as it might appear in aesthetic, ethical, and religious dimensions. The movement between these three areas—according to their Kierkegaardian conception[1]—corresponds roughly to a progression from (1) an immature freedom that eschews regulation to (2) a commitment to abiding by rules at the expense of that first sense of freedom to (3) the growing coincidence of the two, seemingly opposed elements of openness and confinement. At its height, the third stage of play is the moment of balance, harmonious resolution, or synthesis insofar as it allows for liberty within limitation. According to this view, the most robust form of freedom does not need to do away with regulation in order to show itself as such. Instead, the height of freedom is the power to transcend boundaries from within them. At the end of the play dialectic, one realizes that one is at liberty not in spite of the confines of rules but through them. One has power not only when one plays around with limits, gerrymandering them, but when one can play within them, demonstrating admirable skill in managing impediments.

A player may say that she is free when she plays because she can subvert the rules by cheating or because she can leave the game whenever she wants. She may also locate freedom in the pleasure of relative consequences. If the game is not one that she is invested in winning, she can engage the rules while being at ease psychologically, knowing that the instructions have a bearing for the time of the game alone. This attitude finds freedom in detachment. Upon reflection, a person may also acknowledge the freedom of freely choosing to submit to rules. Such a player knows herself to be free

---

[1] I present Kierkegaard's idiosyncratic senses of these terms below, in section II.

because she realizes that she enters into the boundaries of play voluntarily. She does not have to be autonomous (in the sense of giving the *nomos*, law, of the game to herself) in order to be free; she can abide by the rules established by the game designer(s), and so willingly obey another.

This sampling of several different possible expressions of the freedom of play shows that the definition of freedom is also at stake in the progression of play forms. In the second movement in which play is considered under "ethical" qualifications, for example, the willingness to lose one type of freedom—the nominal freedom of doing whatever one wants—is regarded as essential to acquiring a truer liberty. Simultaneously, the comprehension of limitation is transformed as one moves through the aesthetic, ethical, and religious stages of play. Through their practices of play, people may cease to regard regulations negatively as what foreclose options. Instead, by playing differently, they may come to appreciate how structure opens possibility. This reappraisal of boundaries may apply to structures imposed externally. Even if players do not begin to embrace constraint as such—even if there is good cause to decry rigid borders—at the apex of their development players are able to respond masterfully to the force of boundaries. Thus, within the scope of this study, liberty and constraint are not seen as having a stable meaning that holds for all types of play. The understanding of freedom and limitation is itself dynamic in nature, and subject to transformation.

Players, too, may be seen to develop across these stages. It is not only that people may come to be better *qua* players, improving a game skill or mastering a game, by spending time at play. Playfulness—which I am taking to be the trait that enables the negotiation of the liberty-limitation tension in games—might take hold more deeply in

players *qua* people and become increasingly manifest in other areas of their lives, where

they encounter all sorts of resistance, rules, and disappointments.[2]

To test this idea and trace the shifting relationship between the desire to break

free from rules and the inclination to look to rules or other constraints as sources of

freedom, I studied five play forms in conjunction with an interdisciplinary set of

classical and contemporary thinkers. These figures include Erik Erikson, Friedrich

Schleiermacher, Blaise Pascal, Plato, and the contemporary scholars of improvisation

Gary Peters and Danielle Goldman. Kierkegaard informs this writing structurally; at no

time do I address his ideas on play, however. Furthermore, the seminal play theorists[3]—

and especially the play theologians[4]—stand in the background, informing my

understanding of play as, on the one hand, an inner-teleological activity set apart from

work and rest, and as, on the other hand, a theological good.

---

[2] In associating negotiation with play, I acknowledge effort as an important element of play, which distinguishes play from sheer rest. For, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*), "negotiate" signifies the negation of *otium*, Latin for "leisure," "freedom from business," "ease."

[3] The giants in the field are—within anthropology and sociology—Johan Huizinga (*Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture*, published in 1938), Roger Caillois (*Man, Play and Games*, published in French in 1958), and now, with his *Religion in Human Evolution* (2011), Robert Bellah. More than any other source from the play literature, Caillois' shaped my thinking. In particular, I was influenced by his categories of *agon*, or competitive play, *alea*, or the play of chance, *mimesis*, or the play of imitation, and *ilinx*, or the play of radical movement. Within philosophy, the predominant figures are Friedrich Schiller (*On the Aesthetic Education of Man: In a Series of Letters*, from 1793), Hans-Georg Gadamer (*Truth and Method*, 1960), and Jacques Derrida ("Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences" in *Writing and Difference*, 1966). The expert in the areas of education and children's psychology is Brian Sutton-Smith (*The Ambiguity of Play*, 1997).

[4] The leaders of the theology of play movement of the 1970s were Jürgen Moltmann and Karl Rahner. Centered on Moltmann's piece "The First Liberated Men in Creation," the collection *The Theology of Play* came out in 1972. Hugo Rahner's Thomist-inspired essays, including a piece on Aristotle's notion of *eutrapelia*, were gathered under the title *Man at Play* and published that year. Other notable authors in this area include Harvey Cox (*The Feast of Fools: A Theological Essay on Festivity and Fantasy*, 1969), Robert E. Neale (*In Praise of Play*, 1969), David L. Miller (*Gods and Games: Toward a Theology of Play*, 1970), and Sam Keen (*To a Dancing God*, 1970). Without being able to stipulate its significance, I will note that the rise of the theology of play movement coincides with the emergence of video games. On the latter's development, see the Brief Timeline of Video Game History (xvii-xxi) and "Arcade Games of the 1970s" (Chapter 6) of Mark J.P. Wolf's *The Video Game Explosion: A History from PONG to PlayStation® and Beyond*. Current-day interest in the theological significance of play seems to be focused primarily although not exclusively on improvisation. See, for example, Jeremy Begbie (*Theology, Music and Time*, 2000), Samuel Wells (*Improvisation: The Drama of Christian Ethics*, 2004), and Nimi Wariboko (*The Pentecostal Principle: Ethical Methodology in New Spirit*, 2012).

In looking to the specific forms of play, games, and play-based identities that I do—these are: children's play, online role-playing games, a wager on Christian theism, divine puppets, and improvisation—I only proffer examples of aesthetic, ethical, and religious play. I intend to use these instantiations of play in very circumscribed ways. I neither think that the progression from the aesthetic to the religious is the developmental path through which all players pass, nor do I think that it is possible to classify all types of play under Kierkegaard's categories. Every individual may begin to play as a child but not every player ends an improviser; one does not move along this trajectory necessarily or as a matter of course. Further, it is not immediately obvious how to categorize other games and play experiences in this framework. Where would the simple pastime of crossword puzzles fit, or sports games? The schematizing limitation is unproblematic insofar as I am not setting out to account for all types of play but to hit the narrower target of theorizing play as, in its best moments, a confining-yet-freeing activity through which one may express and cultivate the disposition of playfulness—a good valuable for life. To stress: this project is an extended exercise in experimental thinking. The examples of play that I have chosen are, like play, variable, and the aesthetic, ethical, and religious categories of Kierkegaard's that I employ are to be regarded more as paradigms of play than as progressive stages.

I will proceed to outline the arguments of each of my five chapters (in Part I), leaving a "thick description" of Kierkegaard's categories for the next section of this introduction (Part II). Following the statement of the definitive marks of aesthetic, ethical, and religious ways of life that will set the boundaries for my investigation, I will conclude with a brief statement of the intuitions that motivate this project (Part III).

I. CHAPTER DESCRIPTIONS

In chapter 1, I draw on the work of several twentieth-century psychologists (including Melanie Klein, Erik Erikson, and D.W. Winnicott) to examine children's play. My argument with respect to children and play in short is that play is a developmental good which, paradoxically, must be pursued for its own sake in order for its benefits to be realized. Broaching children's play instrumentally ruins its rewards. I would maintain that this facet of necessary indirectness applies to the advantageousness of adult play, as well.[5] Indeed, one of the reasons it is important for me to start this project with a statement in chapter 1 of the developmental function of play is that I want to claim that play proves salutary to selfhood *throughout* life—*and that I want to maintain this while "protecting" play from being appropriated as a tool for individual improvement in areas like morality and education*. Typically, as young children we play and through our play find mastery or training in physical and psychic arenas. With age, we are able to cultivate ourselves in further dimensions, including those of cognition and morality, by playing. If we let it, the fruitfulness of engaging in purposively non-purposive activities extends well beyond adolescence. This hinges on the delicate task of honoring the nature of play as intrinsically valuable, refusing the temptation to treat play as something it is not. In short, the conditions for children's development in play teach us to trust that there are positive effects of adult play that come secondarily, as by-products.

In chapter 2, I use views of *Phantasie*, or fantasy, from works of the nineteenth-century German Romantic philosopher and famed Protestant theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher as a framework for theorizing *World of Warcraft*. (This is an unusual move and, to my knowledge, a completely unprecedented application of

---

[5] A striking parallel with an aspect of religious ritual bears mentioning. The Christian tradition broadly construed understands worship to be advantageous for human beings. Worshippers should praise God for God's sake, however; if they seek to win something for themselves by participating in worship, they distort the activity and lose its benefits, which are incidental.

Schleiermacher's notion of fantasy.) *World of Warcraft*, or *WoW*, is a particular instance of a videogame genre known as Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs). A type of play belonging distinctively to the computer age, MMORPGs involve acting out highly imaginative roles in settings that are large, virtual, and social. Player agency in these make-believe worlds is mediated by avatars, which are images or characters (often very stylized in nature) that represent the players onscreen.

Taking fantasy and the interrelation of avatars and agency as the chief points of interest in chapter 2, I set out to make two arguments. The first is that the complicated relationship between agency and avatars in *WoW* mirrors the interstitiality that is characteristic of the free play of the mind in acts of fantasizing generally. In (offline exercises of) fantasy, the mind is free to combine images and ideas that do not normally go together. The mind, however, is not entirely self-directed in this process. The "I" is somehow both in control and subject to a loss of control in fantasizing. Similarly, players of *WoW* are free to express, explore, and leave behind aspects of their identity *while they are in the game world*; this is the case even as players stand, potentially, to be overpowered by their avatar roles.

That first argument about interstitiality leads to the second stance that I take up in chapter 2, which is that games such as *WoW* are imperfectly escapist. To be sure, players of all games remain tethered to reality to some degree. What is of interest is the way that *WoW* reproduces and reaffirms reality. The fantasy world of *WoW* widely differs from the ordinary sphere of life, of course, but the presence of some unreality does not prevent the game from reinforcing aspects of our shared world. In fact, the fantasy world of this MMORPG exhibits numerous features of reality, including the replication of work-like tasks! A perhaps less trivial point about escapism and fantasy is that seeking to live out of one's mind is an imperfect or incomplete strategy for dealing with real-life difficulties. Spending vast amounts of time in the immersive, highly sensory environments of online games does not guarantee a transformation of one's

inner character—for good or ill. Even if we set aside our worries about the typically

violent features of MMORPGs and grant that MMORPGs are pastimes that serve as

harmless, even helpful, escape-valves from the social, ethical, and professional pressures

of one's everyday, real life, we can point to the need to go beyond their play form

"existentially." Insofar as they only enable you to live better *virtually*, MMORPGs offer a

shallow or immature freedom, which does not reliably extend to the real world. To this

extent, MMORPGs are inadequate as guides for lives of embodied, actual commitment

and constraint.[6] And so I pivot from the aesthetic part of the dissertation, composed of

chapters 1 and 2, to the part on ethics.

In chapter 3, the sole chapter in the section of the dissertation on ethics, I

consider game playing in terms of decision-making. Blaise Pascal's "Wager" argument,

§418 of the Lafuma edition of the *Pensées*, serves as a model for an anti-escapist game in

that the effect of gambling on the existence of God is a serious confrontation with

oneself. Making this decision requires that one face who one really is. In this thought

fragment, officially titled "*Infini – Rien*," infinity – nothing, Pascal strips away the

il*lus*ory and de*lus*ional connotations of *ludus* (game), unmasking his interlocutors' actual

investments: This is a game in which they *do* have a stake. Taking up Pascal's point of

view, we might say that it is incumbent on the believer to reveal to an agnostic that

abstaining from decision is itself a decision. The apologist is only urging the

noncommittal libertine to make an explicit choice for or against God.

Turning to the short, four-page text of "*Infini – Rien*" in chapter 3 effects a shift in

method as well as in subject matter. By taking up this famous bit of Pascal's work, I not

only step into a moment in early modern philosophy as it is being carried out in

seventeenth-century France in the debates surrounding the religious community of Port-

---

[6] To be sure, *World of Warcraft* and games of its ilk may be regarded in a variety of ways; they do not merely lend themselves to being considered aesthetically and when they do admit of aesthetic analysis, it is usually under a different sense of "aesthetic."

Royal. I also change the form of my analysis to that of a close reading. Thus, the substance of chapter 3 is a six-fold interpretation of the Wager. Alongside the theme of freedom, which is critical as the through-line of this dissertation, my reading affords attention to the issues of reason, immediacy, passion, totality, and certainty. I argue that these features appear in Pascal's apology as paradoxes and polarities. These points may be announced simply as follows: (1) Pascal insists that this wager is a *forced game*; (2) reason has an enormous role in the making of this bet, even though the capacity of reason is presented as severely limited and in need of being transcended; (3) the quality of immediacy, which is frequently although not universally associated with gambling, is undone in the thinking of eternity; (4) passion, which was once an obstacle to belief in God, is transformed through embodied rituals into an aid for a faithful way of life; (5) in retrospect, the totality of the stakes wagered will seem as nothing; and (6) in the course of risking his life on God, the libertine will find absolute security.

Overlaying these specific points of interpretation are my claims that Pascal redeems play by responding to (or replacing) the *divertissement* of his libertine interlocutor with a game that saves, and that insofar as Pascal's argument is a game, it is one that he rigs to win.

Chapters 4 and 5 comprise the third and final section of the dissertation, which is on religion (not as defined by contemporary scholars but, again, as construed by Kierkegaard). In chapter 4, I give an account of Plato's claims about play in three passages from the *Laws* (4.715e-716d, 1.644d-645c, and 7.803a-804c), the last of which contains the well-known injunction that "man should spend his whole life at 'play'— sacrificing, singing, and dancing …" (803e, Saunders's translation). Chapter 4 builds off of the work of textual analysis of the Wager to some degree and extends the personal sense of play. That is, the idea in Pascal's argument was that a decision on whether or not to believe in God is necessitated by our specifically human existence: being human leads us to play a game about, if not with, God. By contrast, Plato represents human

nature as fundamentally toylike. In the *Laws*, human beings are—minimally—players in god's game or—more strongly—toy-artifacts made by god.[7] As puppets, we are moved to act according to the interplay of our desires and reason. The cords of the passions are multiple and intransigently rigid; they are always liable to be in tension with reason, a singular cord that is made of the more valuable and pliable metal of gold, which is why we need the help of god and the laws. In order that we have the golden string "win" in the battle with the passions, and so act in the right way, we must be willing to be pulled along. This willingness is akin to lowliness, both as a position (we are guided from above) and a disposition (we do wrong to think of ourselves immoderately, as having the properties of god).[8]

Being a puppet means having a two-fold identity, and entails behaving in a certain way. My exposition of the three passages from the *Laws* shows how the values of lowliness and rationality are mutually moderating in Plato's argument. One maintains modesty as one follows divine and civil laws, and obeys the dictates of reason. Thus, the wonder of one's religious identity as a divine toything is balanced by the duty of obedience. Similarly, the offensive sense that one is being ridiculed in being considered a puppet is leveled by the dignity of the golden cord of reason by which the puppet, with the help of god and the laws, is moved. Thinking about who we are in quintessentially playful terms changes how we live. Being toys leads us to obey and to play. Freedom and limitation are evinced in this conjunction of levity and obedience.

---

[7] Plato's theology is complicated. At times he writes of a singular god, *ho theos*, in a way that identifies the deity metaphysically with the Form of the Good. Scholars such as Michael Bordt also discuss, largely on the basis of the *Timaeus*, the possibility that Plato holds a view of "weak monotheism." According to the stance of weak monotheism, there are many sub-gods in addition to the one main god (Sattler, *Bryn Mawr Classical Review*). Perhaps the clearest, most important thing to note is that Plato did not think of the gods as having traits of the Olympian gods, who would have needed to be entertained by human beings. To capture some of this complexity, I will primarily use "god" in the singular, lower-case form in the discussion of Plato and play. The places where it is appropriate to write in the plural, of gods, I will. For another project, this slippage may be a faulty imprecision. It seems permissible for this work, however, given the context of the discussion of puppetry.

[8] Human beings may aspire to share in divine qualities by emulating god.

In chapter 5, I supplant the image of puppetry with improvisation as a model for how to make one's way in the world. It is not so much that the field of play has expanded—I am not contending that all of life is a game; to whatever degree this sentiment is found in the discussion of Plato in chapter 4, it is overcome in the last sub-strata—as that particular practices of play, such as jazz, comedy, and contact (dance) improvisation are powerful enough to extend to the way one understands and conducts oneself in one's non-play life. The playfulness of improvisation is powerful enough to affect or even reconstitute the non-playing self. Improvisation sets the grounds for freedom and grace to meet through the promise of redeemability, on the one hand, and the liminal nature of the endeavor, on the other. That is, even as they engage in contestation, improvisers have the capacity to redeem the gestures offered up in their play. Moreover, play, like the celebrated Christian notion of grace, is neither fully active nor fully passive. Improvisation therefore approximates grace as a strenuous but unstriving work that, being its own pleasure, refuses orientation to products and rewards. Improvisation is the height of play insofar as it exemplifies play's inner-teleological nature as well as the joyful coherence of constraint and freedom.

After making the case that a dialectic of freedom and constraint unfurls *within* and *between* the five iterations of play that I have identified across three spheres—namely, those of childhood play and Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (under aesthetic play), a Pascalian wager on God's existence (under an ethical qualification of play), puppetry that illustrates the stature of human beings and leads to practices of play, and graceful, power-filled exercises in improvisation (under play marked by the religious)—I turn to the conclusion of the dissertation. I bring "Free to Play" to an end with a brief engagement of the question of virtue. How might the foregoing study contribute to the field of virtue ethics? What would it mean to consider playfulness as a virtue in light of the dialectic of liberty and limitation?

II. Kierkegaard's Spheres of Existence

A prolific author who wrote (geographically) at the margin of German society and (generically) from within the limen of literature and philosophy, Søren Kierkegaard (May 05, 1813 – November 11, 1855) gave expression to notions of subjectivity and faith that informed twentieth-century thought in profound ways through the figures of Franz Rosenzweig, Martin Heidegger, Emmanuel Lévinas, Paul Tillich, and others. Aside from his intellectual legacy, Kierkegaard is marked in my mind by what he shares with Dostoevsky and Pascal—a sort of ideological temperament, which exhibits artistry, faithfulness to Christ, concern for the conditions of existence, and an astute awareness of human psychology.[9]

In his works of literary philosophy, Kierkegaard gives voice to imaginary figures as a way of portraying and analyzing different ways of life, the predominant spheres of selfhood being the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious. Thus, the pseudonymous author of *Fear and Trembling* Johannes de Silentio exemplifies the point of view of someone in search of faith. The opinions of Anti-Climacus in *Sickness unto Death* and *Practice in Christianity* as one who "consider himself to be a Christian on an extraordinarily high level" serve as a response to the humbler perspective of the non-Christian Johannes Climacus in *Philosophical Fragments* and *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (Kierkegaard, *JP* VI 6433; Pap. X[1], A 517; quoted in Hong and Hong, "Historical Introduction," *Philosophical Fragments*, x). According to the discrepancy in their beliefs, Anti-Climacus and Johannes Climacus model existence differently. Apart from pseudonymous authors, Kierkegaard uses various characters within his works to represent contradictory life stances. Thus, Judge William offers a counterpoint to the

---

[9] For more on Kierkegaard's life, see Joakim Garff's magisterial biography (2005). For an introduction to Kierkegaard's thought, one may consult M. Jamie Ferreira's guide in the Blackwell Great Minds series (2009).

aesthete in *Either/Or*. I give these flashes of examples and perspectives as a way of making the general point that Kierkegaard's famously indirect exposition of ways of being in the world pervades his philosophical writing, with particular works highlighting particular forms of life. Such writing is a non-digital instance, perhaps, of role-playing.[10]

Although it is hard to identify a single book in Kierkegaard's *oeuvre* that presents a balanced, unified portrait of the three spheres—even *Stages on Life's Way* foregrounds the ethical and the religious to the relative neglect of the aesthetic—there are a few lines and passages that address the spheres in their conjunction. The most concise, explicit naming occurs in the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*: "There are three existence-spheres: the esthetic, the ethical, the religious" (501). Later in that same work Climacus states:

> If in himself the individual is undialectical and has his dialectic outside himself, then we have the *esthetic interpretations*. If the individual is dialectically turned inward in self-assertion in such a way that the ultimate foundation does not in itself become dialectical, since the underlying self is used to surmount and assert itself, then we have the *ethical interpretation*. If the individual is defined as dialectically turned inward in self-annihilation before God, then we have *Religiousness A*. If the individual is paradoxical-dialectical, every remnant of original immanence annihilated, and all connection cut away, and the individual situated at the edge of existence, then we have the *paradoxical-religious*. This paradoxical inwardness is the greatest possible, because even the most dialectical qualification, if it is still within immanence, has, as it were, a possibility of an escape, of a shifting away, of a withdrawal into the eternal behind it; it is as if everything were not actually at stake. But the break makes the inwardness the greatest possible. (*CUP*, 572, original emphasis)

It is worth underscoring that Climacus refrains from using the term "Christianity" in this passage. Rather, he refers to the Christian tradition as the paradoxical-religious. He addresses this choice to abstain from naming Christianity in a rare footnote, stating "According to this plan, one will be able to orient oneself and, without being disturbed by anyone's use of Christ's name and the whole Christian terminology in an esthetic

---

[10] I am indebted to Mark C. Taylor for the insight that Kierkegaard allows his readers to imagine themselves into different modes of being in a role-playing way. His pseudonymous authors may even be said to take on the function that avatars hold in MMORPGs.

discourse, will be able to look only at the categories" (ibid.). Its turn to inwardness and its embodiment of paradox are what distinguish Christianity from the form(s) of religion represented by Religiousness *A*.

Before turning to the spheres, I would do well to announce these additional preliminary points: First, the aesthetic-ethical-religious progression is dialectical. The aesthetic and the ethical are retained in the religious, even as sensuousness, fantasy, choice, and moderate humility are sublimated in improvisation. "If you cannot manage to see the esthetic, the ethical, and the religious as the three great allies, if you do not know how to preserve the unity of the different manifestations everything gains in these different spheres, then life is without meaning …" (*Either/Or*, II, 147). There is hope in maintaining the possibility of preserving the unity of difference. Second, although I am not employing the categories for crossing between spheres, I should acknowledge that Climacus presents "irony [as] the *confinium* [border territory] between the esthetic and the ethical" and "humor [as] the *confinium* between the ethical and the religious" (*CUP*, 501-502). According to the Kierkegaard scholar C. Stephen Evans, Climacus sees irony and humor as what make possible the growth of the individual (*Kierkegaard's "Fragments" and "Postscript,"* 188-189). Third, it is worth noting the 2-1-2 structure of the spheres. Both the aesthetic and the religious moments have two poles, whereas the ethical is undivided. The first figure representative of aestheticism, Aesthete A, is reflected at least in the title in the first pole of the final stage: Religiousness *A*. Perhaps, then, Kierkegaard attributes two aspects to the religious in order to emphasize that the aesthetic is recovered in its fullness. Kierkegaard's presentation of Christianity as a second immediacy that negates-yet-retains possibility accords with this interpretation.

Aesthetic: Sensuous Immediacy

There are two poles to the aesthetic sphere, that of sensuous immediacy and that of over-reflection. These are portrayed in the first volume of *Either/Or* (*Aut/Aut* in Danish), a remarkable work that contains a number of genres, including aphorisms, essays on aesthetic theory, letters, a diary (that of a seducer), and a sermon (Walsh, "Kierkegaard," 64).

It takes multiple characters in *Either/Or* for Kierkegaard to accomplish his usual pseudonymous distancing. There is an anonymous aesthete, referred to simply as "A"—whose papers constitute the first volume, which corresponds to the "Either" of the title. The second volume, "Or," is the letter written to A by the character Judge William. This second figure has a respectable job and a wife—and, what is more, a name. The anonymity of the aesthete fits in well with the aesthetic way of life. Lacking full-fledged subjectivity, aesthetes obey a herd mentality. They are easily lost in the crowd. The third pseudonymous figure behind *Either/Or* is the editor Victor Eremita, who ties the writings of "A" and "B" together. (Eremita refers to the judge on occasion as "B.") I draw attention to these names of "A" and "B" in order to recall the recuperation of the aesthetic in the religious sphere. As noted above, the final sphere of Kierkegaard's schema also has two poles, those of Religiousness *A* and the paradox of Religiousness *B*. To be clear, though, the character of the Judge stands in for the sphere of ethics. Whether or not he is referred to as "B," Judge William does not represent the second element within the aesthetic, but the second stage of life.

Evidently, sensuousness and immediacy are the two traits to which to attend in describing the first pole of the aesthetic sphere. These are bound together—the desires of sensuousness demand immediate fulfillment—and are related to other qualities like abstraction and inauthenticity. Although the notions of abstraction and inauthenticity pertain in interesting ways to Kierkegaard's treatment of the crowd, which in turn

relates to the idea that children in their youth are defined by the people who surround them, I will focus on the elements of desire and time in the brief description that follows.

The sensuous immediacy definitive of the aesthetic in its earliest, least developed moment finds expression in erotic love, music, and poetry, but also in the life of a child. Evans conjoins the aesthetic with recognizable aspects of childhood and childishness, writing:

> The aesthetic stage is the natural life-stance of a child; it is the place where human existence begins. The aesthete is characterized in various ways: as someone who lives "for the moment", as someone who lives for pleasure, happiness, or satisfaction. The aesthete lives a life dominated by "immediacy" in the sense that the purpose of life seems to be simply to satisfy as many desires as possible. (*Kierkegaard's Ethic of Love* (*KEL*), 45)

Immediacy may be taken to mean "right away and without delay" in a child's impatient cry, "I want this *now*!" As "not mediated," immediacy may also signify something like what is automatic.[11] In this register, immediacy relates to the child's direct—untrained and unrestrained—approach to life, which Evans frames in terms of a "natural life-stance." This framing of the process of becoming a self in the developmental terms of childhood congrues with my choice of subject matter—play and childhood development—for chapter 1.

Like a child, the aesthete lives in a discontinuous series of "here and now" moments. (Keep in mind that Kierkegaard is not glorifying this experience of "being in the now" in the way that post-modern Westerners tend to uphold Zen thinking.) To the extent that the aesthete lives out of his sensuousness, he is determined by his fleeting desires and is dependent on his external circumstances. He looks to what is outside of himself for the ground of his identity, and so exhibits what George Pattison terms

---

[11] Thus, the judge states that "the esthetic in a person is that by which he spontaneously and immediately is what he is; the ethical is that by which he becomes what he becomes" (*Either/Or*, II, 178).

"existential inauthenticity" ("Art in an Age of Reflection," 77).[12] Unable or unwilling to make use of reflection, the aesthete is not free. He is left to chase his selfish whims, which are by definition momentary.

Sounds are as quick to flee as desires are to dissipate. One may look to music, then, as an art form that exhibits the continually successive ephemerality that is definitive of sensuous immediacy. "Music always expresses the immediate in its immediacy" (*Either/Or*, I, 70) and "[s]ensuous immediacy has its absolute medium in music …" (71) and "the elemental originality of the sensuous is music's essential theme …" are claims that aesthete A puts forth in the piece "The Immediate Erotic Stages or The Musical-Erotic." In these assertions, which link sensuousness and immediacy to music, music seems to be nothing more than the wordless performance of sound after sound. Note follows note in a relentless rush of "nows."[13]

Beyond discussing it relative to the artistic medium of music, aesthete A analyzes sensuous immediacy as it appears in the central figure of Mozart's masterpiece *Don Giovanni*.

> Don Giovanni is absolutely musical. He desires sensuously; he seduces with the demonic power of the sensuous; he seduces all. Words, lines, are not suitable for him, for then he immediately becomes *a reflective individual*. He does not have that kind of continuance at all but hurries on in an eternal vanishing, just like the music, which is over as soon as the sound has stopped and comes into existence again only when it sounds once again. (102, emphasis mine)

---

[12] Another relevant binary, and one that maps on to the eternal/historical in important ways, is the abstract/concrete. I take inauthenticity to align with abstraction or the failure to find concrete expression in the historical. See *Either/Or*, I, 55.

[13] "[S]ensuousness in its elemental originality is the absolute theme of music. The sensuous in its essential nature is absolutely lyrical, and in music it erupts in all its lyrical impatience. That is, it is qualified by spirit and therefore is power, life, movement, continual unrest, continual succession. But this unrest, this succession, does not enrich it; it continually remains the same; it does not unfold but incessantly rushes forward as if in a single breath. If I were to describe this lyricism with a single predicate, I would have to say: It sounds—and with this I come back again to the elemental originality of the sensuous as that which in its immediacy manifests itself musically" (*Either/Or*, I, 71). Here, a "lyrical impatience" reminiscent of the impatience of the child is shown to involve succession without enrichment.

Aesthete A advances his analysis here by introducing the comparison of a reflective individual (which is indicative of the second pole of the aesthetic sphere). Sensuousness may be understood not only "positively," as physical desire, but also "negatively," according to what it lacks: In the stage of sensuous immediacy, reflection and language are absent (71), as is a distinction between one's environment and oneself. The distinction between subject and object, and the deferral of gratification, come to pass with the emergence of reflection. Thus, immediacy accounts for the idea that "[m]usic consistently excludes word" (Taylor, *Kierkegaard's Pseudonymous Authorship* (*KPA*), 159) as well as the claim that the self is unaware of others (158).

Wanting occurs instantaneously under this form of life, which is to say both that under the earliest sphere of existence we want things at every instant and that we want our wishes to be met instantly. Speaking takes the time of thought, however.[14] As opposed to the inherent fragmentation of sensuous immediacy, continuity marks reflection. The cognitive capacity of reflection offers a way to bind the self, making it cohesive. Too much oscillation occurs, as it were, between the first and the second poles of the aesthetic. By the next phase of the first stage, the problem will not be a lack of reflection but too much thinking. Furthermore, in extreme occupation with the past or excessive anticipation of the future, reflection neglects the present.

The above passage describes the seductive activity of Don Giovanni, but aesthete A is careful to qualify his statement so as to avoid an inconsistency.

> [O]ne must apply the word "seducer" to Don Giovanni very cautiously. This is not because Don Giovanni is so perfect, but because he does not fall within ethical categories at all. … To be a seducer always takes a certain reflection and consciousness, and as soon as this is present, it can be appropriate to speak of craftiness and machinations and subtle wiles. Don Giovanni lacks this consciousness. Therefore, he does not seduce. He desires … (*Either/Or*, I, 98-99)

---

[14] Pattison explains that music is not sufficiently like language to share in the relation that language has with spirit: "Music, like language, addresses itself to the ear, has time as its element, and, thus far, involves the negation of the immediate sensuousness. Yet if music stands closest to language in the hierarchy of media, it is not language and it is not party to the complete correlation that exists between language and spirit …" (82).

Don Giovanni's existence is completely sensual in that it is based on the incessant rising

and passing away of desires. What makes Don Giovanni an appropriate model for pure

musicality disqualifies him from undertaking amorous quests. (Imagine the frustration,

always desiring but incapable of ever being satisfied!) The essential characteristics of

sensuous immediacy stand in contradiction to the skills of seduction. In particular, there

is a conflict with respect to time:

> He [Don Giovanni] lacks the time to be a seducer, the time beforehand in which
> to lay his plan and the time afterward in which to become conscious of his act. A
> seducer, therefore, ought to possess a power that Don Giovanni does not have,
> however well equipped he is otherwise: the power of words. As soon as we give
> him the power of words, he ceases to be musical, and the esthetic interest
> becomes a different one. (99)

Strictly speaking, Don Giovanni does not count as a proper seducer because he does not

have the time, self-awareness, or verbal resources necessary for planning romantic

conquests. As long as he is stuck in the sphere of sensuousness, he lives immediately—

not reflectively.[15] When language and reflection arise, however, a person's relation to

time changes. One can live in the past or the future, in addition to being in the moment.

Now on the cusp of the transition to the second pole of the aesthetic sphere, we spot

Don Juan. Unlike Don Giovanni, Don Juan is "a seducer [who] readily becomes so

reflective that he ceases to be absolutely musical" (116; cf. 108). Insisting on the

incompatibility of total sensuous immediacy and reflection, aesthete A asserts that the

presence of the power of speech cancels a completely musical identity that is abstract.

(Elsewhere, he states quite directly that "[r]eflection is fatal to the immediate" (70).) Don

---

[15] Again, Pattison offers helpful explication. Referring to the relationship between sense and
spirit, and highlighting the trait of anxiety, he writes: "Though outside the realm of reflection,
Don Giovanni, as the passionate sensuousness excluded and therefore posited by Christianity,
does have a certain relation to spirit. … Don Giovanni's anxiety is not 'subjective' because he is
not anxious for himself or aware of himself as anxiety; it is 'substantial' because it belongs to the
objectivity of his life situation. Anxiety is the reflection in his personality of the claims of a
freedom, a spiritual life, that he does not, subjectively, acknowledge but Christianity declares to
be a human being's ultimate goal" (83). I also cite this passage here because it looks ahead to the
relation between Christianity, freedom, and subjectivity.

Juan, who epitomizes the art of seduction, points to another character of *Either/Or*, the imperfect seducer who over-excels at plotting.

Aesthetic: Over-reflection

The two sides of the aesthetic stand in opposition to one another, even as the aesthetic sphere is defined over against the ethical. That is, we may form an understanding of what the aesthetic sphere is as a whole by considering how it differs from the ethical way of life. Similarly, it is possible to describe the *pre*-reflective character of sensuous immediacy as it is countered in the second iteration of the aesthetic by over-reflection. As Evans states, "The reflective aesthete seems to lack immediacy; he has learned to enjoy life by stepping back from life and taking its events as raw materials for aesthetic reflection and creation. Even the story of seduction told in the Diary reflects this ambiguous relation to actuality" (*KEL*, 46). It is worth turning to "The Seducer's Diary," the last piece of Volume I of *Either/Or*, to see what it means for an aesthete's mind to go into overdrive.

The conceit of the text is that the editor Victor Eremita has stumbled across the papers of a seducer (303). The symbolic gesture of this—finding excerpts on loose pages—is not lost on the reader. Like the aesthete's incomplete self, the traces of an aesthete's life are fragmentary and discontinuous. It is left to the editor to piece the story together, discovering what happened or failed to happen between Johannes and his love interest Cordelia. Here is a telling sample from Johannes's reflections:

> The thirtieth
>
> Everywhere our paths cross. Today I met her three times. I know about her every little outing, when and where I shall come across her, but I do not use this knowledge to contrive an encounter with her—on the contrary, I am prodigal on a frightful scale. A meeting that often has cost me several hours of waiting is wasted as if it were a bagatelle. I do not approach her, I merely skirt the periphery of her existence. If I know that she is going to Mrs. Jansen's, I prefer not to encounter her unless it is important for me to make a particular

observation. I prefer to come to Mrs. Jansen's a littler early and, if possible, to pass her at the door as she is coming and I am going, or on the steps, where I nonchalantly pass by her. ... (341)

The passage goes on in this tortured vein for some length. This is only one entry among the collection; the length of the whole section (at about 150 pages) is noticeably drawn out.

In thinking too much, the second, more cognitively developed aesthete loses his relationship with immediacy and actuality. Having a spectacularly detailed fantasy life deprives him of real-life commitments. This unwillingness to pursue a life project faithfully on the level of our communal, everyday existence is the flaw for which he is chided by Judge William in Volume II of *Either/Or*. (One can hear here contemporary criticisms of the extreme videogamer who shifts so much of his existence to online spheres of play that his normal relationships and work commitments suffer.) Desperately attached to the possibilities of his mind, the seducer-aesthete foregoes acting in the here and now.

The second pole of the aesthetic is not considered merely in terms of erotic efforts gone awry. The same problem of deliberation at the expense of action is represented in an example of avoiding an ecclesiastical calling. Judge William writes critically to the aesthete of the aesthete's constant deferral:

> Yes, if deliberating were the task for human life, then you would be close to perfection. I shall illustrate. To be appropriate to you, the alternatives must naturally be bold: either a pastor—or an actor. Here is the dilemma. Now all your passionate energy is aroused; reflection with its hundred arms seizes the idea of becoming a pastor. You find no rest; day and night you think about it; you read all the books you can find, go to church three times every Sunday, make the acquaintance of pastors, write sermons yourself, deliver them to yourself, and for half a year you are dead to the whole world. Now you are ready; you can speak with more insight and seemingly with more experience about being a pastor than many a one who has been a pastor for twenty years. When you meet them, it arouses your exasperation that they do not know how to expectorate with a completely different eloquence. You say: Is this enthusiasm? Compared with them, I, who am not a pastor, who have not dedicated myself to being a pastor, I speak with the voice of angels. *That may very well be true, but you nevertheless did not become a pastor.* (*Either/Or*, II, 165, emphasis mine)

The comic but also tragic nature of such situations further comes to light in this passage. An either/or choice is on the table. The alternatives that Judge William contrives for the aesthete—pastor or actor—differ considerably from one another. In this illustration, the aesthete goes to extreme lengths—even delivering sermons to himself!—as he contemplates what it would be like to be a pastor.[16] The aesthete who suffers from over-reflection is *intellectually active*, moving in thought in the direction of one of the two life scenarios *without taking one concrete step toward actualizing this possibility*. The Judge deals with the aesthete in a pointed manner in order to reveal something about his life situation to him. This is not unlike how Pascal treats the libertine to whom he writes.

The aesthete stands on the brink of becoming an ethical subject. What would it take to tip him over to a form of life that privileges choice and commitment? Existential progress occurs when a person realizes the limitations of one sphere and pushes forward to a new way of life. To recapitulate: Within the aesthetic sphere, sensuous immediacy eventually gave rise to speech and reflection. Deliberation took the shape of an "enormous mental activity" (*Either/Or*, II, 165), though. Because the needle swung from no thinking to too much thinking, the aesthete became trapped in his mind. Having sought freedom in total possibility, he now finds himself unfree (179). At this point, the aesthetic way of life may be seen to be inadequate. The over-reflection is not simply "over," it is infinite. Such unending reflection "can be stopped only by the engagement of the will in decision" (Taylor, *KPA*, 165). This activation of the will entails the appearance of ethics; it constitutes the movement beyond the aesthetic. Choice— ethical choice—breaks in, and the self has the chance to develop.

---

[16] As the editor says, the tense of such a life is subjunctive, not indicative (*Either/Or*, I, 304).

Ethical

      Decision for Kierkegaard is a matter of ethics and selfhood, almost definitively

so. In being characterized by an individual's capacity for making choices, the second

stage of existence represents an advance over the aesthetic way of life. It is distinguished

by having the exact property that lives characterized by immediacy or fantastic over-

reflection lack. The central figure of the second volume of *Either/Or* is a man who, by his

very vocation and standing in life, represents an ethical way of being in the world. As a

judge (not a poet) and a husband (not a seducer), William is an exemplar of decision and

commitment. He makes the essential link shared by decision and the category of the

ethical clear in writing that "[o]n the whole, to choose is an intrinsic and stringent term

for the ethical. Wherever in the stricter sense there is a question of an Either / Or, one can

always be sure that the ethical has something to do with it" (*Either/Or*, II, 166). The slash

mark between Either / Or indicates an "absolute" gap—the separation of the aesthetic

from the ethical, the difference between not-choosing and choosing (177).[17] Whereas the

aesthete, dedicated to leaving his every option open, continually defers choice (and so

defers selfhood), the ethical individual is a person of commitment. No matter how much

he ages physically, the aesthete remains immature. He retains a non-admirable inner

childlikeness. Refusing to take steps that would leave any trace, he never grows into a

fully-existing man. By contrast, someone who lives in the ethical sphere takes a step

toward forming his very *self* in the choices he makes (163).

      Thus, there stands a significant relation between decision and selfhood, the

features of which are *personal* and *paradoxical*. It may seem unnecessary to mention the

personal nature of selfhood. It is worth lifting this point out, however, as a way of

showing the sad state of the aesthete. The decisions that I make give shape to my own

---

[17] It is important to reaffirm that the aesthetic remains in the ethical, but *relatively* so.

self because they are *my* decisions. To paraphrase Judge William, if I do not follow the choices of others (that is, if I make a genuine choice), I become myself and not another (177). An aesthete not only fails to make choices, he may make "false" choices in adopting the decisions of others. It is as if in living by someone else's direction, he takes on someone else's self—his end state being impersonal, imposterous. Beyond signifying immaturity, this refusal of agency—the "assumption of a passive or fatalistic attitude toward one's existence"—results in despair (Kosch, 143).

Using the language of youth and age, childhood and ripeness, the Judge differentiates these two senses of choice:

> I think of my early youth, when without really comprehending what it is to make a choice in life I listened with childish trust to the talk of my elders, and the moment of choice became a very solemn and momentous matter, although in choosing, I only followed someone else's directions. I think of moments later in life when I stood at the crossroads, when my soul was made ripe in the hour of decision. (*Either/Or*, II, 157)

Early in life, circumstances determine one's identity. Choices are made at adults' behest. Despite carrying a serious air, these moments do not involve choices in the strongest sense. And, tautologically, because they do not demand real "Choices," they do not produce maturity. Instead, it is the crossroads that signifies the brink of maturity.[18] At the crossroads, one decides one's self. It is a place one goes alone in the "midnight hour" way sung about in gospel choruses.

> When around one everything has become silent, solemn as a clear, starlit night, when the soul comes to be alone in the whole world, then before one there appears, not an extraordinary human being, but the eternal power itself, then the heavens seem to open, and the *I* chooses itself or, more correctly, receives itself. … He does not become someone other than he was before, but he becomes himself. (177)

---

[18] One might wonder whether a person could fail to cross over into maturity depending on the choice she makes at the point of decision. Judge William goes some way to assuaging this worry in writing, "[n]o, I only want to bring you to the point where this choice truly has meaning for you. It is on this that everything turns. As soon as a person can be brought to stand at the crossroads in such a way that there is no way out for him except to choose, he will choose the right thing" (168). This distinction (between a decision that is good merely by being made and a decision that is right) will reappear in my treatment of the theme of uncertainty in Pascal's wagering *pensée*.

And so the transition into a mature, ethical way of living that occurs at the crossroads of decision is personal insofar as one makes the decision alone, in isolation (240),[19] and insofar as the content of one's choice is one's own self.

It would behoove us to keep the second sphere of existence in tension with what precedes and follows it: The ethical is robustly subjective relative to the aesthetic but not to the religious. In other words, we should keep in view the personal aspect of an ethical way of life in addition to the impersonal, universal dimension of duty. We may turn to *Fear and Trembling* as well as *Either/Or* for a portrait of this sphere to see why the ethical does not constitute the ultimate *telos* of existence in Kierkegaard's account. Ethics is supplanted by religiousness in Kierkegaard's schema because of how the ethical individual, as Kierkegaard describes him, privileges the infinite at the expense of earthly finitude. To Kierkegaard, it is not enough to escape into the ether of the ethical-eternal.

At the heart of *Fear and Trembling* stand two knights who personify the ethical and the religious. The ethical way of life, which is grounded in a system of universal laws, is represented by the knight of infinite resignation. This paradigm is superseded by the religious, radically individual way of life of the knight of faith. In short, there is a "teleological suspension of the ethical," and the Absolute—or the absurd—is the *telos* that relativizes the greatness of ethics. The miracle of the knight of faith is that he, unlike the knight of infinite resignation, is at home in the everyday. Not by his own strength but by virtue of the absurd has he recuperated in the second movement (that of faith) what he has lost in the first movement (that of resignation). He has not only achieved the movement from the finite to infinity. He has accomplished the infinitely harder task of

---

[19] On being a lonely wayfarer, Taylor writes: "But over against what he believes to be the tendency of Hegelian philosophy and modern Christendom to dissipate concrete individuality in abstract universality, or to lose self in the crowd, Kierkegaard resolutely maintains that 'the individual as the individual is higher than the universal, is justified over against it, is not subordinate but superior. … This position cannot be mediated, for all mediation comes about precisely by virtue of the universal; it is and remains to all eternity a paradox.' The birth of such spiritual individuality requires severing the umbilical cord of sociality through the difficult labor of differentiating self and other. The one who undertakes this spiritual pilgrimage ever remains a lonely wayfarer" (*Journeys to Selfhood*, 180).

moving from the infinite back to the finite. Thus, the inadequacy of operating in the realm of shared, effable ethics (as the knight of infinite resignation does) balances the admiration that is owed to Judge William for the qualities he has, that the aesthete lacks. Curiously, however, religiousness *B* represents a return to the wordlessness of sensuous immediacy, as the knight of faith has no language to express the absurdity of his belief.

Having addressed the personal, let us turn to the paradoxical element of decision's interplay with selfhood. The paradox of selfhood arises in the receiving—in choosing myself, I *receive* myself. At first glance, this idea of reception with its connotations of passivity counters the sense of rigorous self-building that Judge William has been advocating. After all, how does receiving a self differ from allowing adults to make choices on a child's behalf? In that instance, the values being sought would belong to the agent from whom one receives the self, rather than the developing individual. An explanation of this difficulty of the distance between self-determination and the decision out of which an ethical self arises comes from the Judge's distinction between creation and choice. His clarification itself is rooted in the concept of contradiction:

> The choice here makes two dialectical movements simultaneously—that which is chosen does not exist and comes into existence through the choice—and that which is chosen exists; otherwise it was not a choice. In other words, if what I chose did not exist but came into existence absolutely through the choice, then I did not choose—then I created. But I do not create myself—I choose myself. Therefore, whereas nature is created from nothing, whereas I myself as immediate personality am created from nothing, I as free spirit am born out of the principle of contradiction or am born through my choosing myself. (*Either/Or*, II, 215-216)

In pointing to the simultaneity of the act, it is as if the Judge is saying, "I decide the decision that decides itself" or, as he does indeed write, "I choose the absolute that chooses me" (213).[20] And so the content of the decision one discovers at the "crossroads"—the "either … or" moment that represents the brink of maturity—is one's entire, already-existing self.

---

[20] I owe the expression of a decision that makes itself to Johanna Magin.

Kierkegaard's depictions of growing into ethical existence relate to Pascal's approach in his argument for choosing to be a Christian self, a self that, theologically, may be described as already existing in Christ before being taken up in or by the person converting. It is for this reason, as well as for the shared interest in eternal happiness, that chapter 3 is devoted to the text "*Infini – rien*." "Infinity – nothing" is Pascal's argument in §418 of the *Pensées* for believing in God's existence. It is more commonly called "the Wager."

Gambling is an apt illustration for this transformation in selfhood because making a bet is a commitment to a particular decision. Although it is possible to hedge bets, one cannot put money down on an unspecified horse or place one's chips on an indeterminate hand any more than one can genuinely choose a general self. More starkly, though, gambling is pertinent on account of the possibility of "going all in." In the risky forms of play classified as gambling, not every wager is a total one, but the most thrilling and consequential ones are, and the choice to stake one's eternal happiness on God absolutely is. Whereas in Kierkegaard's scheme an ethical person presents herself in radical openness and extreme vulnerability to totality, the aesthete closes himself off from the world to his own detriment (*Either/Or*, II, 322). He always holds some part of his *self* back and so loses out on the reward of actuality. If he were Pascal's libertine interlocutor, the aesthete would eschew commitment and refuse to place a bet. He would therefore end the game prematurely and himself remain pre-mature.

I have also alluded to the theme shared between Kierkegaard and Pascal of eternal happiness. Pascal's argument directs the wagerer to make a bet on God as a way of securing an infinity of infinite happiness. The gamble, if taken seriously, will have consequences for how a person lives in this life, but the overarching interest is an eternal

one. Again, this focus on infinity accords with defining aspects of the ethical as

Kierkegaard sets the sphere forth.[21]

Lastly, before turning to attributes of the third sphere of the religious, I will raise

a potential problem for chapter 3 and a provisional solution to that problem. A worry I

have had in selecting the Wager as the text to stand in for my discussion of play through

the lens of Kierkegaardian ethics is that the Wager's content introduces theism too early

in my analysis. That is, it may seem that Pascal's recommendation of Christianity as a

way of life would supply material that belongs more to the third section of the

dissertation, which addresses the sphere of religious selfhood. The following quotation

from C. Stephen Evans's *Kierkegaard's Ethic of Love* helps to assuage this fear, however:

"Kierkegaard's ethicists typically see their ethical duties as divine commands, and

Kierkegaard does not think this is a mistake on their part. The difference between the

ethical and religious spheres therefore has little to do with belief or lack of belief in God"

(49). To this Evans adds the insight that ethics sees general rules, not individual callings

(ibid.). It may be, then, that making a decision to believe in the God of Christianity as

part of a reason-governed quest for unending happiness does not signal the moment of

arrival at fully realized subjectivity but constitutes a step in the journey to selfhood. By

Kierkegaard's lights, it would be necessary to build on the formal decision that Pascal's

interlocutor makes on the basis of universal reason through the continual cultivation of

aspects of individual existence like authenticity and passion.

Religious: Religiousness *A*, or the Propaedeutic to Christianity

As the final mode of existence before proper Christianity, Religiousness *A* is the

penultimate stage in the development of an individual. Its overall defining mark is that

---

[21] To take one example, Climacus distinguishes between historical and ahistorical sources of eternal happiness (*Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 577).

it points to the highest level of being, "the paradoxical-religious." Religiousness *A* is

identified with both non-Christian religions and non-Christian practices of Christianity.

Thus, to Evans's description of Religiousness *A* as "a kind of humanistic stance that does

not require belief in [the Christian] God" (*KEL*, 49), it is worth adding that Religiousness

A is also found in Christendom among the culturally easy, non-subjective adoption of

Christianity.[22]

Of Kierkegaard's five stages and sub-stages on the pathway to full selfhood,

Religiousness *A* is the hardest to define precisely. One challenge in offering a coherent

account of the sphere derives from the style of the texts in which it is represented. At the

end of the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, for example, Kierkegaard's pseudonymous

author Johannes Climacus produces a treatment of Religiousness *A* by parodying

Hegel's language. Clarity is sacrificed there, it seems to me, to the airing—or

performance—of an intellectual disagreement. Another cause of confusion is the degree

to which Religiousness *A* alternately resembles and represents a regression from the

ethical sphere. At points, Religiousness *A* blends into the ethical. So, for example, one

wonders whether in withdrawing into the eternal the knight of infinite resignation from

Fear and Trembling corresponds to the ethical moment or the first stage of the religious.

To this end, Calvin O. Schrag writes in *Kierkegaard in Post/Modernity* that "one speaks

properly of religiousness A as a conjugated 'ethico-religious sphere' … it moves within

the bounds of moral consciousness …" (8). At other times, Kierkegaard seems to muddle

his own developmental framework for existence by ascribing qualities to Religiousness

A that would appear to fall even *below* the threshold of the ethical. Here I have in mind

---

[22] "The essentially Christian is also distinguished by its category, and wherever this is not present or is used maunderingly the essentially Christian is not present, unless it is assumed that mentioning Christ's name, even taking Christ's name in vain, is Christianity" (*CUP*, 535). Simply having the name "Christian," does not make someone or something so. Furthermore, "Religiousness *A* can be present in paganism, and in Christianity it can be the religiousness of everyone who is not decisively Christian, whether baptized or not" (557). On this point, see also Schrag, 8.

the role of decisiveness for both stages.[23] In short, Kierkegaard may be criticized for

failing to provide an understanding of how Religiousness *A* demonstrates an

improvement on the way of life that is defined by universal, impersonal ethical

commitments. For this reason, I take some latitude in the type of play I assign to chapter

4 of this dissertation. For me, it is worth foregrounding the choice of author over and

above the qualities of play, and so I address Plato's *Laws* in the chapter that correlates to

Religiousness *A*. This is a fitting choice on account of Plato's rough alignment with

pagan, pre-Christian philosophy more than because of any relation between puppetry,

which is the form of playful identity presented in the *Laws*, and facets of Religiousness *A*

like guilt-consciousness and imperviousness to decisions in time.[24]

Despite these problems of clear delineation, there are a few characteristics that

mark Religiousness *A* to which we may point. These primarily revolve around its

relation to time and to Christianity. (In keeping with Kierkegaard's practice of referring

to Christianity as Religiousness *B* and the *paradoxical-religious*, I will alternate between

these expressions.) In what follows in this sub-section, I will address the focus on

immortality, alongside the interest in the eternal and the perception of universal

humanity, within Religiousness *A*. Then, I will turn to the ways in which Religiousness

A contrasts with and is a prelude to the paradox of Christianity. These two facets (of

time and orientation toward future faith) conjoin in the teaching and figure of Socrates.

For, Socrates' doctrine of *anamnesis*, or recollection, presupposes the immortality of the

---

[23] In this I am in agreement with Mark C. Taylor, who draws out this concern in *Kierkegaard's Pseudonymous Authorship*. "Religion *A* does not view time and decision as having final significance for the self. The essential interest of the self is an immortal soul that is thought to be unaffected by decisions in time … Religion *A*'s conviction of the soul's immortality manifests a failure to recognize that decisions are thoroughly definitive of the self, or that the self is what it becomes through its decisions" (285; cf. *KPA*, 255). Was not this—making a decision in time—one of the important gains achieved under the ethical qualification? How then does Kierkegaard's treatment of Religiousness *A* as coming *after* the ethical square with his description of the ethical itself?

[24] It is worth mentioning Kierkegaard's investment in separating Socrates from Plato. Regarding the issue of immortality, he spares Socrates criticism but lays blame on Plato. One is mindful that Kierkegaard's use of pseudonyms may also serve this protective function.

soul. Additionally, at least according to some Christian thinkers, Socrates' life foreshadows that of Christ. For example, in his privileging of oral teaching over written production, as well as in his personal charisma, less than beautiful appearance, poverty, death, and willingness to attribute immorality to ignorance, Socrates anticipates the person of Christ. From Kierkegaard's point of view, Plato's philosophy, indebted as it is to Socrates, may be a propaedeutic to Christianity—paralleling the way that Religiousness *A* prepares the path for the paradoxical-religious. Insufficient in itself to realize blessedness in its fullest form, Plato's philosophy is nevertheless valuable in pointing the way to the life defined by difficult faith.[25] Relating this to the content of chapters 4 and 5, we may say that the consideration of human beings as the puppets of god offers a religious identity but not a strategy for how to make it through the day; the improvisational manner of playing points to rich theological notions, namely those of grace and redemption, which can guide one's entire conduct and leave one with resources for dealing with the unwanted and unexpected.

To tease out the connection between the immortal, eternal, and infinite within Religiousness *A*, it is helpful to reiterate at least cursorily Socrates' stance on learning as it is conveyed in the *Meno* (80a-86c). (Note that this is the passage that Climacus addresses at the start of *Philosophical Fragments*.) What enables Socrates to hold that learning is recollection is the conviction that knowledge is innate to the soul. It is always already there: "As the soul is immortal, has been born often and has seen all things here and in the underworld, there is nothing which it has not learned; so it is in no way surprising that it can recollect the things it knew before, both about virtue and other things" (81c-d).[26] Congruent with the eternality of truth is the immortality of the soul.

---

[25] On the association of Religiousness *A* with Socrates, see Taylor, *KPA*, 251-ff.

[26] These lines find an echo in the *Republic* in Socrates' statement "Then education is the craft concerned with … turning around … It isn't the craft of putting sight into the soul. Education takes for granted that sight is there but that it isn't turned the right way or looking where it ought to look, and it tries to redirect it appropriately" (518d, Grube and Reeve translation).

One implication of the idea that knowledge is located in the soul is that the soul is the point of contact with God (Taylor, *KPA*, 254). A further consequence of this understanding is that learning recovers something from the past. The deficit of this orientation to what lies behind is that it precludes the acceptance of Christ's bursting into the present.

These and related observations are succinctly captured in William McDonald's entry on Kierkegaard in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, where McDonald writes:

> According to Johannes Climacus, faith is a miracle, a gift from God whereby eternal truth enters time in the instant. This Christian conception of the relation between (eternal) truth and time is distinct from the Socratic notion that (eternal) truth is always already within us—it just needs to be recovered by means of recollection (*anamnesis*). The condition for realizing (eternal) truth for the Christian is a gift (*Gave*) from God, but its realization is a task (*Opgave*) which must be repeatedly performed by the individual believer. Whereas Socratic recollection is a recuperation of the past, Christian repetition is a "recollection forwards"—so that the eternal (future) truth is captured in time. (*SEP*, "Kierkegaard," 2012 revision, accessed 03/16/2013)

The difference between Socratic and Christian ways of thinking about truth is explained here in terms not only of time but also of externality. For the Christian, salvation breaks into human temporality. But for just this reason the Christian is also broken. "The consciousness of sin is the paradox, and about this the paradox is again very consistent, that the existing person does not discover it by himself but gets to know it from outside. The identity is therefore broken" (*CUP*, 534). The healing of salvation comes from without, it comes from above, it comes from God. And even though salvation is freely given—as a gift—it is a gift that is opened through "a task." It requires continual re-acceptance. The ongoing reappropriation of truth somehow also entails singular interiority. The Christian self is always going inward.

A person whose life occurs under the mode of Religiousness *A* "relates himself to the eternal," which "is everywhere" (*CUP*, 570, 584). Concomitantly, such a person has *universal* views of humanity. He "sympathize[s] with every human being *qua* human being" (585). Although we may take such broad sympathy to be a positive trait,

Johannes Climacus treats this as a flaw to be overcome in the highest stage of selfhood,

that of faith. Seeing recourse to the eternal as incompatible with existence, which is

irreducibly individual, Climacus presents Religiousness *A* as self-annihilating.[27] At this

juncture, we should remember that Climacus has earlier and at length praised truth as

subjectivity and inwardness (*CUP*, Part Two, Section II, Chapter II). The interiority and

particularity of faith stand in contrast, therefore, with the objective generality of

Religiousness *A* and of the ethical, which operates by universal and universalizable

laws.

Additional key features of Religiousness *B* may be anticipated by highlighting

the connection that holds between the particularity of faith and the historical. The

particularity of the historical means that it exists at certain moments in certain places.[28]

The historical is therefore dissimilar to the eternal, which is taken to be ubiquitous.

Understanding the opposing nature of these features is essential, given that their

opposition accounts for the paradox of Christianity, which revolves around the belief—

which is to be made one's own—that the immortal God entered the world in time.[29]

"… In Religiousness *A* there is no historical point of departure. Only in the realm of time

does the individual discover that he must presuppose himself to be eternal. The moment

in time is therefore *eo ipso* swallowed by the eternal. In time, the individual reflects upon

his being eternal. This contradiction is only within immanence" (*CUP*, 573). Again, the

---

[27] "If the individual is defined as dialectically turned inward in self-annihilation before God, then we have *Religiousness A*" (*CUP*, 572). The person of Religiousness *A* and the person of Religiousness *B* are both turned inward, but the person of Religiousness *A* is turned inward in a self-annihilating way.

[28] "An existing person cannot be in two places at the same time, cannot be subject-object. When he is closest to being in two places at the same time, he is in passion; but passion is only momentary, and passion is the highest pitch of subjectivity" (*CUP*, 199). It strikes me that this notion of the passion of the proximity of being in two places at once relates to the assertion that under the paradoxical-religious, i.e. Christianity, the individual stands "at the *edge* of existence" (*CUP*, 572, emphasis mine).

[29] "How does the paradox emerge? By placing the eternal, essential truth together with existing. Consequently, if we place it together in the truth itself, the truth becomes a paradox. The eternal truth has come into existence in time. That is the paradox" (*CUP*, 209).

sub-stages of a sphere may be understood in their combination. What is annihilated or subsumed in Religiousness *A* finds proper expression in Religiousness *B* as the transcendent is recognized in immanence. The paradox of Christianity is given expression repeatedly in the *Philosophical Fragments* and the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* in variants on the formulation that a person of faith bases his *eternal* happiness on *historical* knowledge (see, for example, *CUP*, 575). Among the other contradictions that Christianity synthesizes—the inner and the outer, possibility and actuality, freedom and necessity, finitude and infinity—is that of the temporal and the eternal.

A significant point of shortcoming in Religiousness *A* from the perspective of the paradoxical-religious is the way that the propaedeutic sphere to Christianity fails to see the sinfulness of the self (Taylor, *KPA*, 280). Religiousness *A* offers guilt-consciousness, which necessarily precedes the sin-consciousness that is found in Christianity.[30] Let us turn again to Schrag, who maintains that "Religiousness A is not simply morality with a touch of religious fervor" (8). Schrag explains the progress beyond the ethical sphere in this way: "Specifically, what religiousness A brings to the ethical situatedness of the existing subject in the process of becoming subjective is the determinant of guilt. … Proceeding in tandem with this guilt-consciousness is a problematization of the moral self-assurance in the ethical; a recognition of the insufficiency of the subject's moral efforts towards rectifying its misdeeds; and a questioning of the power of the human will to do that which it ought" (8-9). I should be forthcoming and state that I do not see this as according tightly with the message of the *Laws*. Plato, by way of the character of the Athenian Stranger, will point the reader's attention to god (*theos*) and to the good of practicing obedience to reason. However, I am unaware of any treatment of guilt in the text. I suppose this means that my use of the *Laws* in tandem with Religiousness *A* falls mostly on the ethical side of the ethico-religious conjunction. But for Kierkegaard,

---

[30] There is a possible parallel with the way guilt is treated from within the first pole of the aesthetic stage. A relevant text for considering this idea is the piece "The Tragic in Ancient Drama" in Volume I of *Either/Or* (pp. 137-164).

Religiousness *A* in its more extensive sense is a steppingstone to true belief because it calls forth the "infinite passion of need" (*CUP*, 201). Showing us our moral inadequacy, it pushes us to a higher goal. The chain of guilt becomes a harness (like the strings of a divine puppet?) that ultimately attaches the person to eternal happiness (534). Paradoxically, the harness of guilt becomes a source of freedom; the freedom of the aesthetic is redefined:

> Call this recollecting of guilt a chain and say that it is never removed from the prisoner, and you will describe only one side of the matter, because a chain is most closely connected only with the idea of the loss of freedom, but the eternal recollecting of guilt is also a burden that must be dragged along from place to place in time. Therefore, rather call this eternal recollecting of guilt a harness and say of the prisoner: He will never be unharnessed. His consciousness is that he is decisively changed, although the subject's identity is still that it is he himself who becomes conscious of guilt by joining the guilt together with the relation to an eternal happiness. But he still relates himself to an eternal happiness, and guilt consciousness is a higher expression than suffering. Moreover, in the suffering of guilt-consciousness, the guilt at one and the same time alleviates and festers, alleviates because it is an expression of freedom, as this can be in the ethical-religious sphere, where the positive is distinguished by the negative, freedom by guilt, and not distinguished esthetically directly: freedom distinguished by freedom. (533-534)

After tarrying in the ethical sphere, a person may come to see a terrifying inconsistency between who she is and who she ought to be. Furthermore, this fracture may cause her to look outside of the self for a solution to immorality, despair, and sin. This leads to the possibility of what Climacus refers to as "the break." Again, the issue of time proves decisive.

Kierkegaard seems much less concerned with Christ's involvement in the *establishment* of time, its "realization" in the course of creation, than in Christ's paradoxical *intersection* with it in his incarnate life (*CUP,* 596). Appreciating the directionality of this relation between the eternal and the existing is crucial for maintaining a proper comprehension of the final stage of the final sphere. It is one aspect that differentiates Religiousness *B* from Religiousness *A*. Whereas in Religiousness *A*, the eternal is diffused in its pervasive immanence, in Religiousness *B*, the eternal is present in a directed manner, focused in the historical and particular individual of Jesus

Christ. Thus, because of her view of the immanence of eternity, a person at the stage of existence of Religiousness *A assumes* immortality for herself. The person living under Religiousness *B*, however, *becomes* immortal in the moment(s) of deciding faith—the response to the particularity of Christ's historical incarnation.[31] This conclusion is distinct from but not incommensurate with the contemporary scholar Jeremy Begbie's position that accepting the bounded nature of time leads Christians to a gracious God.

Religious: Religiousness *B*, the Paradox of Faith, or Christianity

We now arrive fully (and not simply by comparison) at the form of life that Kierkegaard deems highest.

The absoluteness of the absolute paradox of Christianity—or, more specifically, of Christ's identity as the "God-man"—comes for Kierkegaard from the absolute difference between God and the world. Writing of Kierkegaard's view of transcendence, which stands in contrast to Hegel's preference for divine immanence, Mark C. Taylor states, "Because God and the world are totally different and are not implicitly identical, it is, Kierkegaard argues, absolutely paradoxical to believe that a particular individual within the world is at the same time God" (*KPA*, 294). If the distance between God and humanity were not so great—if God were like the world and already immanent in it—it would not be absurd to believe in a further step of immanence such as the "enfleshment" of the divine Spirit in a human person. In other words, there is a link between divine immanence and comprehensibility and, conversely, between God's total Otherness and God's absolute incomprehensibility to human beings. That is why

---

[31] What I find particularly interesting is how these concepts re-arise in Harvey Cox's interpretation of the death of God. Cox writes: "The death of God is an experience of man. It has occurred in the life of modern industrial man *because he has lost his capacity to live at once in history and in eternity*, and to affirm all the dimensions of time as his friends" (*Feast of Fools*, 43, emphasis mine). Festivity, of course, is part of the antidote that Cox proposes to this failure toward time.

Kierkegaard not only writes about believing in the absurd but also believing by virtue of the absurd. It is incongruous to approach the absurd rationally.[32] But why entertain an engagement with the absurd at all? Why not remain in the realm of the rational? As Taylor explains, it is because of our sin that we must not abandon the absurd. Our imperfection compels us to seek the eternal blessing of reprieve, a forgiveness that arises through God's movement towards us in Christ (*KPA*, 316). The appropriate response to Christianity, therefore, is a faith that is upheld by the strength of the absurd itself. This recalls the stance Kierkegaard describes as "a paradoxical relation to the paradox" (*CUP*, 323).

In addition to his paradoxical status as the God-man, Christ embodies a paradox of time, bringing the temporal together with the eternal. Christ, being God and therefore holding all of the marks of divinity including various dimensions of infinitude, enters the world as a particular individual *at a particular moment* (*KPA*, 295). This paradoxical collision of time lays down the standard for a peculiar way of life for Christ's followers, who find it possible to develop as authentic individuals *through commitment to the eternal*. Keeping in mind a conception of the eternal as external, otherworldly, and "far away," we can appreciate the oddity of the Christian pattern of life. For, it is in exercising a universal commitment that people of faith cultivate their particularities and become *more* rooted in the ordinary and everyday. This is because, as Kierkegaard posits, the bond to the Absolute must be formed subjectively, out of the core of one's own existence. It cannot be generically, passively, or vicariously assumed. What I want to suggest, then, is that (mysteriously) the necessarily individual and personal quality of the decision to relate absolutely to the Absolute serves as a protection against escapism, the signature condition and fatal flaw of the reflective aesthete examined in terms of

---

[32] For more on the nature of the absurd, see *Fear and Trembling*, 75. "The absurd is not one distinction among others embraced by understanding. It is not the same as the improbable, the unexpected, the unforeseen. …" (Hannay translation).

videogames in chapter 2 of this dissertation. Although—or what is more difficult to comprehend, because—a Christian's ultimate relation in life is to a radically transcendent Being, she exists in time in a visibly undifferentiated but thoroughly present way. She does her grocery shopping, she takes trips to the amusement park, she pays her taxes like everyone else (like the knight of faith she is unrecognizable, like Christ she lives by incognito), and yet she is more truly "present" in living out these quotidian tasks than the aesthete and the ethicist.[33,34] For this reason, Christianity deserves to be called the stage of *second immediacy*. The first aesthete's relation to time is, in good dialectical fashion, cancelled yet elevated. In having a paradoxical relation with time, the Christian imitates Christ and foretells what it is like to live peaceably with time. Beyond the parallel to experiences of simultaneously belonging inside and outside of time in improvisational performances, there is a possible relation to the ludic paradox of experiencing limitations as sources of liberty.

Having touched briefly on the ideas of absoluteness, absurdity, paradox, and the eternal—essential to Kierkegaard's depiction of Religiousness *B*—let me now move on to equilibrium and open blessing.

Throughout this examination, there are different ways I want to discuss the phenomenon of play. In one sense, play is a realm of slackening—a place of literal and metaphorical wiggle-room. The phrase "play of a rope" conveys this relaxation or easement of tensions nicely, particularly in its contradistinction with taut or overly-rigid spheres committed to rationality and control (of self and world) to the extreme. As will be seen in more detail in chapter 5, these characterizations also invite consideration of

---

[33] In his essay "Relational Transcendence in Divine Agency," Paul Sponheim addresses the issue of relatedness by drawing on a weighty statement from the *Practice in Christianity* that links the disguised nature of Christ with freedom and resolution. "The coming about of this incarnate relatedness is rooted in the freedom of transcendence for 'it was Christ's free resolve from eternity to want to be incognito' (*PC*, 138-139)" (53).

[34] It is worth asking what it is about lacking an absolute commitment to the Absolute that makes the non-Christian (or pre-Christian) *more* prone to flights from this world than the Christian believer.

play as graceful movement such as dancers make—sheer difficulty transformed into appearances of effortlessness. Additionally, and the point over which I wish to hover here, play may be associated with aperture. This is true insofar as workers are closed to distraction and risk, and players are open to chance and the unknown. Kierkegaard's presentation of Christianity opens up another sense of openness, though. This openness is from the side of God, when God grants forgiveness.

There are a number of characteristics that set Christianity apart from the aesthetic, ethical, and Religiousness *A* stages of existence. Two distinguishing marks in particular are the achievement of equilibrium and the recognition of the self's sinfulness: only in Christianity is there a balance between the elements of the self (such as the body and soul, sensuousness and reflection, and necessity and possibility) on the one hand, and the coming to terms with a need for a mediator to the divine, on the other (Bertung, 56; Taylor, *KPA*, 268). Whereas the former is a claim about the end of anxiety and despair (equilibrium marks victory both over the refusal of a person to be a self and over defiant expressions of existence), the latter claim about sin and the need for a bridge to God is a claim about closed-off-edness: our sin bars us from entering God's presence (sometimes by closing us in on ourselves in a state of "shut-upness," *KPA*, 286-287). God's forgiveness is an opening and potentially playful move in that it discloses the blessings of living before God. "Because the self's eternal blessedness is contingent upon such a proper relation to God, the possibility of eternal blessedness is reopened by God's act in Christ" (*KPA*, 291).

What of equilibrium, then? More pointedly—how might the absence of equilibrium affect openness? Interestingly, Taylor shows that the imbalance of the preceding stages is more than a shortcoming of selfhood; it is the very sinfulness that closes one off from the goodness of immortality. In the following passage, Taylor begins with a statement of contrast to the viewpoint of Religiousness *A* on the enduring nature of the self. Then, having reaffirmed the connection between the ideas of the eternal and

possibility, he goes further by drawing a consequential relation between equilibrium and eternity on the one hand, and disequilibrium and damnation on the other. Note that these are relations of openness and closed-ness (or, what is the same thing as closed-ness, openness unto cessation). Taylor writes: "Kierkegaard does not think that the self is immortal or that it inherently possess eternal blessedness. Eternal blessedness is a possibility that can be realized by the self's maintenance of a balance among its components. The failure to achieve an equilibrium is sin. … [T]he actuality of the self's sinfulness closes the possibility of eternal blessedness and opens the possibility of eternal damnation (i.e., the total obliteration of the self)" (323-324). It is important to grasp this point because the quest for the possibility of blessedness that sin has made impossible is what motivates a person to countenance the paradox of faith. That is, it takes an absurd faith to provide an impossible possibility. Only through belief in the God-man does a road forward into eternity remain open.

This brings us to the idea of *double grace*, or a person's application of grace—an attitude, I would posit, of neither total work nor total rest—in the acceptance of God's grace. By providing a way back to Godself, God shows grace to all of humankind. One might say that engaging in paradox is the "cost" for God of opening eternity to humanity: the possibility of salvation comes to people through the Absolute's willingness to undergo the reversal of the incarnation, even the subjection of the immortality and infinitude of divinity to mortality and the finitude of death. One might add, echoing Max Weber, that there is an intellectual sacrifice on the part of believers in choosing religion ("Science as Vocation," 155). For Kierkegaard, the appropriate response to God is faith, which is not knowledge. Such faith refuses every proclivity for epistemology and each insistence on comprehensibility.

All of this is to say that God's grace does not preclude human works. *While not dependent on good works, salvation nevertheless involves working, but working of a peculiar sort.* This is what it means to respond to God's grace with grace: to refuse to take God's work

for granted by living a spiritually lazy and morally-lax life, and, at the same time, to spurn the opposite inclination toward a life of overwork with its accompanying mentality of "works-righteousness" (and boasting). Keeping Taylor's discussion of equilibrium in mind, we may say that Christians seek to maintain a balanced way of life. Blessing is found in active receiving, in what may perhaps be described as play.

Drawing from Kierkegaard's journals and papers, Robert C. Roberts shows how strenuousness and rest from anxiety are combined alongside earnestness and jest in the sub-stage of Religiousness *B*. Beginning and ending this passage with a quotation from Kierkegaard, he writes:

> "Although it is the utmost strenuousness, imitation [of Christ]—that is, striving for righteousness should be like a jest, a childlike act—if it is to mean something in earnest, that is, be of any value before God—the Atonement is the earnestness. It is detestable, however, for a man to want to use grace, 'since all is grace,' to avoid all striving." So the atonement—the central Christian fact—holds out the possibility for a human life to be a synthesis of the deepest seriousness and the lightest touch. The seriousness and the jest are mutually supportive. For the humor and its attendant joy cannot be deep without the seriousness; and without the "distance" afforded by the atonement the seriousness is "transformed into agonizing anxiety in which a man is burned up, so to speak, and less than ever begins to strive" [*Journals and Papers*, No. 1909 in volume 2]. ("Smiling with God," 173)

There is an apparent consistency across the paradoxes of Christianity. Christ is the God-man who grants a righteousness that must be appropriated in earnest jest. Grace balances grace. Having an attitude of grace towards God's grace thus leads to a rigorous way of being in which one's actions are regarded as tremendously important but nevertheless non-salvific. They are meaningful actions but they are free because they do not proceed from the necessity of attaining salvation. Failure is possible because success in the most important things is assured, having already been secured externally by God.[35] As much as an improviser's, then, an authentic Christian's deeds are non-

---

[35] It is not only that Christians no longer have to worry about succeeding, thanks to the belief that God *succeeded* for humankind, in our place. (This "positive" substitution is usually expressed in the idea the Jesus lived a perfect, sinless life, the victorious and virtuous status of which he is willing to give away.) To this standard theological position, I would like to contribute the possibility that Christians benefit from the reverse side, too. That is, Christians also may find

working works. Restated, having an attitude of grace towards God's grace is the twofold

realization that in the economy of salvation, it is only God's work that matters, and that

in respecting God's "major," salvific work, one is called to a life of good, "minor" works

that are free in their relative smallness.

III. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS: FREEDOM AND FAILURE

> "Freedom" cannot avoid combining, in a unity that has only its own generosity as an index, the values of impulse, chance, luck, the unforeseen, the decided, the game, the discovery, conclusion, dazzlement, syncope, courage, reflection, rupture, terror, suture, abandonment, hope, caprice, rigor, the arbitrary. Also: laughter, tears, scream, word, rapture, chill, shock, energy, sweetness. … Freedom is also wild freedom, the freedom of indifference, the freedom of choice, availability, the free game, freedom of comportment, of air, of love, or of a free time where time begins again. It frees each of these possibilities, each of these notions of freedom, like so many freedoms of freedom—*and it is freedom from these*.
> —Jean-Luc Nancy[36]

I wish to end this introduction by disclosing a few of the intuitions that motivate

this project. While I am not setting out to prove these points, I do think it is fair to

advertise them here at the beginning. The shadow of my contention that a flourishing

life includes play is the stance that the inability to play is somehow wrong—a character

flaw or moral weakness of sorts.[37] A person who is unable on occasion to relax, let go, go

loose, or loosen up is overbound by seriousness. She is unfree. Whatever outer

circumstance (like too much work) or inner state (like too much pride or a dour

disposition), therefore, that would make an individual reluctant to goof around with

children, join a game at which she has no skill, or enter into other situations in which she

---

relief that God *failed* in the place of humankind. God took on the ultimate accomplishment *and* the ultimate failure and, thus, individuals no longer have to worry about failing that badly. There is, as I state in the chapter on improvisation, the freedom to fail.

[36] *The Experience of Freedom*, 56-57, original ellipses, emphasis mine.

[37] Rahner writes of a similar stance in Aquinas. "[U]nmitigated seriousness betokens a lack of virtue" (*Eth. ad Nic.*, IV, 16, 854, quoted in Rahner, 2).

is liable to play the fool is a condition in need of correcting. In short, it strikes me as unhealthy to be unable to cede control at least for a time.[38]

The concern about pride, overseriousness, and undue solemnity gives us a reason not to ignore the place of play in the good life. But there is a related viewpoint that I hold very strongly, which provides a positive motivation to seek play. This second assumption concerns failure. I take it that one of the moral goods that games and other experiences of play offer is the possibility of embracing failure. It is not only that play is valuable because it teaches people perseverance (although this is a fine character trait that many games do bring about and that game designers purposefully aim to cultivate on occasion by structuring games so as to encourage players to try again after losing or messing up). It is also that play provides rare opportunities to leave the framework of success behind. There is something wonderful about "the play's the thing" attitude that cancels concern for outcome. When play takes precedence over consequences—when one becomes more wrapped up in the play itself than in its payoff—one has achieved another form of freedom. It seems to me that improvisers have an extremely high, if not the highest, commitment to valuing play itself over the quality of play, although sheer joy in playing may surely be found to various extents in other play forms as well.

With these introductory notes dispensed, we may now turn to the aesthetic significance of children's play.

---

[38] The converse point—that too much play is problematic—seems so evident as not to have to be stated.

PART I. AESTHETIC PLAY

Chapter 1

The Value of Children's Play: More than a Developmental Good

The physical, emotional, and social processes of maturation that most individuals undergo in the course of infancy and early childhood may be understood in terms of the interplay of freedom and constraint. In general, as they age, children lose certain freedoms (for example, permitted uninhibitedness) and embody particular constraints to a greater extent (like gaining responsibilities and conforming to social regulations) and this often but not exclusively occurs in play. Such development is not unidirectional, to be sure: kids make positive gains in independence, displaying increased mastery, making more decisions intentionally, and exercising self-discipline, even as they abide within the ever-tightening confines of adult expectations and societal norms. It is my task in this chapter, then, to trace a few of the interlocking steps of liberty and limitation, demonstrating how the young begin to work out their individual identities through play, and suggesting how the meaning of play develops in turn throughout this and subsequent stages of life.

Looking at three areas, I will argue that children enact freedom in their play *physically* on account of the external provision of their material needs; *psychologically* in the initial absence of repression and even self-awareness; and *intellectually* to the degree that they can manipulate the world around them with increased precision, controlling its objects and images to ends of their own willing. As I have indicated, these are not freestanding freedoms. The constraints with which they are intertwined—their physical, psychological, and intellectual converses and consequences—may be expressed as a variety of restrictions. These include dependency, (dis)ability, circumstance, desire, discontinuity, accountability, and imitation. The dualistic quality of being something opening and binding indicates that difference is at the heart of diversion: even as it

offers the possibility of consolation, play confronts young people with the challenge of new borders. In other words, play may be defined as a dynamic and evolving phenomenon through which children discover *and* deal with boundaries.

Gaining a general sense of the what and why of children's play is relevant to contemporary concerns; working toward a comprehension of amusement among pre-adolescents will enable us to counter some of the distressing aspects of Western, twenty-first century practices of bringing up girls and boys (especially the trend toward the rigid structuring, oversight, and determination of their toys, time, and space). Furthermore, an examination of childhood play serves my larger interest, viz. understanding and justifying the place of playfulness in the ethical and religious lives of flourishing, adult selves. How ought we to play as children in order to become adults? How ought we to play as adults in order to revive elements of our childhood? We may come to form an opinion of the value of play and its roles throughout our lives by seeing physical, psychological, and intellectual aspects of the paradoxical activity in which freedom, necessity, pleasure, and purpose conjoin.

I. INTRODUCTORY CONCERNS

There is a small set of preliminary matters to which I need to attend before turning squarely to the co-presence of freedom and constraint in this, the first pole of the aesthetic stage of the play dialectic. And while a large body of research stands behind each one of these issues, I will keep my remarks in line with the brevity appropriate to an introduction. In short, I wish to acknowledge that childhood as a notion should not be taken for granted; to stipulate the stages of development as I intend to use them; and to express the difficulty of the very task of seeing what constitutes children's play.

Under the cultural context in which I am writing, the first years of life are normally set apart as a special phase in a person's formation. Consequently, there are

laws and customs that ensure that any boy or girl is nurtured, protected, and given opportunities to grow. This lasts for a relatively extended period, until a morally responsible and viably self-sustaining person begins to appear. By and large, in twenty-first-century America we expect the young to be physically and emotionally indulged and sheltered, and we have an abundance of toy stores, playgrounds, child labor laws, vaccinations, early start programs, and television and game ratings to prove it. However, in other times and places, such as medieval Europe or Puritan New England, people were more liable to be treated in adult-like ways from an early age. Under these circumstances, youths were sent to work and given hefty responsibilities to shoulder. The Romantic category and celebration of "childhood" was simply not available or operative as it is now (which does not mean that infantile behavior was lacking or that other conceptions of early life were absent).[39] This intellectual history notwithstanding, I will broach the first phase of an individual's life as a fruitful and determinative period, which deserves its own conventions and cares.

Non-specialists in children's psychology like myself may find the array, overlap, and dissension of classifications of human development dizzying. For the sake of simplicity, I will rely primarily on the framework employed by Erik Erikson in *Childhood and Society* (1963) and *The Life Cycle Completed* (1998). For further elucidation of terms and descriptions of capabilities, I will draw from the more recent anthology edited by Fromberg and Bergen, *Play from Birth to Twelve: Contexts, Perspectives, and Meanings* (2006). As I discovered, what is at base important to know is that "childhood" refers to the period that spans from the first days of life to the age of twelve. It covers half of the stages of the life cycle, namely infancy (birth to eighteen months), early childhood

---

[39] The scholarly debate over the shifts in the status of childhood in history may be traced across a number of books, including *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life* (1965) by Philippe Ariès, Melvin Konner's *The Evolution of Childhood: Relationships, Emotion, Mind* (2010), Steven Ozment's *Ancestors: The Loving Family in Old Europe* (2001), Shulamith Shahar's *Childhood in the Middle Ages* (1990), and Edward Shorter's *Making of the Modern Family* (1975).

(eighteen months to three years), play or preschool age (three to five years), and school age (six to twelve)—and is followed by adolescence (twelve to eighteen), young adulthood (eighteen to thirty-five), middle adulthood (thirty-five to fifty-five or sixty-five), and maturity (fifty-five or sixty-five to death). Within the activity of playing, there are also developmental expectations. Children are seen as typically moving through an object-motor-social-symbolic progression in how they play. While I will address this spectrum, including the movement toward abstraction that is consistent with imaginary play, I will especially heed the importance of the physical—and sense-based—character of play in the earliest stages of childhood. This also aligns with Kierkegaard's treatment of the first of the two aesthetic ways of life as tied to sensuous immediacy.

Having set forth some of the elemental divisions of development, the surprisingly vexing question of what should count as children's play may now be raised. This problem poses itself, for example, in the following characterization: "Simple exchanges of vocalization are the first games babies play with parents. By 6 weeks infants respond to these overtures with smiles and coos" (Garner and Bergen, 6). What are the grounds for categorizing cooing as game playing? Is it the *exchange* of sounds that allows for play and transforms cooing into something more than mere vocalization, or is it the apparent joyfulness and aimlessness of babies as they utter non-sensical syllables? The "cooing problem," as I will refer to it, represents a larger puzzle, extending beyond a literal interpretation to the characterization of the actions of older children capable of self-expression. In other words, the cooing problem is not only about cooing, it is about the general difficulty of identifying play among babies, toddlers, and preschool-aged children. What definition is adequate for capturing this set of phenomena? Is it playful when a five-year-old runs through a house making loud noises, or when a two-year-old gleefully throws her food on the floor while she is eating? Does reading a bedtime story to a child count as play? Where does play stop and something else begin—and what is that other occurrence? Is it work? Is it plain

experience? This problem stems, I believe, from the nearly intuitive association people (grown people!) draw between play and children. All of a sudden, the unreflective definition of children's play is nothing other than what children do, including making the sound of "coo." But what if a lot of the assumptions about what counts as play in the birth-to-twelve age group were negotiable? What if the proper range of play activities in the young were much narrower than what we routinely take it to be?[40] My goal here is not to provide an answer. On the contrary, I am happy simply to illuminate that we lack an intellectual baseline for determining what childhood play is. I propose that we not seek to respond to the error of drawing too many links between childhood and play by importing a concept of play grounded entirely in theorized adult behavior. In short, it would behoove us to see that it is not in play's nature to remain static and instead to leave room for the meaning of play to develop throughout the maturing process, as if play had its own life span. It is worth keeping this definitional flexibility in mind as we turn to the physical, emotional, psychological, and cognitive gateways of growth that will expand and contract in the course of childhood.

II. CONSTRAINED TO PLAY BUT FREE TO EXPLORE: BIOLOGICAL, ENVIRONMENTAL, AND PHYSICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The constraint first worth noting in children's play is the determined quality of play as a basic human tendency. It is as if children are constrained to play by virtue of being children and that this constraint reaches back to the earliest months of life. At the

---

[40] Brian Sutton-Smith also points to this confusion, acknowledging that "the ambiguities in this part of the field of play owe much to the assumed parallel of forms between play's own skill development and other kinds of nonplay skill development. Analogies here are frequently passed off as causes" (*The Ambiguity of Play*, 51). In his study *The Genesis of Animal Play*, Gordon Burghardt affords brief consideration to the meaning of children's play. In particular, he alludes to the work of Cindy Clark and Peggy Miller, who provide as the four criteria for children's play nonliterality, intrinsic motivation, positive affect, and process flexibility. This standard of measurement for children's play, while helpful, is not definitive (Burghardt, 66).

beginning of the play progression, when babies explore their bodies, interact with their mothers in certain ways while feeding, and make pleasant little sounds for no reason at all, and later, as they exert themselves by leaping and jumping, or enjoy themselves by telling stories and engaging in make-believe, they are being driven not by choice as much as by biology. They are exercising what Schiller described in his *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* as *Spieltrieb*: the deeply human play-instinct or ludic-drive that cuts between sense and reason. And while the *Spieltrieb* is profoundly linked to freedom, it itself seems to arise from necessity. Alison Gopnik makes a similar point with regard to the specific play capacity of fantasy when she asserts: "children aren't wild pretenders because they are consciously trying to learn about the world or other people. They are wild pretenders because they are children and that's what children do. It's only from the broader evolutionary perspective that their uninhibited useless pretense turns out to be among the most deeply functional human activities" (*The Philosophical Baby*, 73). Children become who they will be by being who they are. *How* they play is affected by numerous cultural, historical, familial, and even biological contingencies, but *that* they want to play is a biological guarantee, an organic certainty. As Philip of Novare enjoined in the thirteenth century, "[c]hildren should be allowed to play since nature demands it."[41]

Numerous studies support this claim, that in the juvenile period play comes naturally and serves natural purposes.[42] Rather than rehearse the findings of leading scholars, I will point to repetition as a crucial mechanism within the play-develop-play process. Sensorimotor skills necessary for survival (and acculturation) are refined through the practice that playful situations afford—and then re-afford, which is to say

---

[41] My attention was drawn to this line of Philip of Novare in Maurice Keen's "The Birth of Childhood," which appeared in the *New York Review of Books* on June 13, 1991.

[42] I refer the reader to Peter K. Smith, *Children and Play* (2010), Gordon Burghardt, *The Genesis of Animal Play* (2005), and Bob Hughes, *Evolutionary Playwork and Reflective Analytic Practice* (2012).

that the play cycle itself is on repeat. With the attaining of new heights, play does not

cease but continues in youths' unintentional quest for more, and more impressive,

talents. As Walter Benjamin, Freud, and nearly all caretakers have noted, children

delight in repetition.[43] For them, the game must be played again, the movie must be

watched again, the story must be read again. But children must also practice physical

maneuvers repeatedly until they have overcome the intransigence of their own bodies.

Through exploratory acts and a repetitiveness that cannot be neatly separated from that

of play, children come to possess control over their physical selves and bodily impulses.

Thus, they master a host of practical skills, and these capacities contribute to their future

independence and potential for self-care as much as to their being "civilized." As they

figure out how to crawl and walk, learn how to hold writing implements and use

silverware, and acquire the dexterity for tying shoelaces and buttoning buttons, children

face challenges but they do not experience drudgery.

Curiously, not only is repetition biologically useful as a training device; the

delight that repetition brings is also beneficial. That is, nature seems to take advantage of

play's pleasure as a way of motivating the cultivation of traits needed for the

preservation and enhancement of life. "Programming" certain animals to seek play is a

way to ensure that adaptive behaviors are acquired. Or, to paraphrase the Soviet

---

[43] We might take for granted the correlation between repetition and mastery, but we would do well to pay attention to Benjamin's observation of the pleasurable intensity that repetition lends to children's play. "We know that for a child repetition is the soul of play, that nothing gives him greater pleasure than to 'Do it again!' … 'All things would be resolved in a trice / If we could only do them twice.' Children act on this proverb of Goethe's. Except that the child is not satisfied with twice, but wants the same thing again and again, a hundred or even a thousand times. This is not only the way to master frightening fundamental experiences—by deadening one's own response, by arbitrarily conjuring up experiences, or through parody; it also means enjoying one's victories and triumphs over and over again, with total intensity. … A child creates the entire event anew and starts again right from the beginning" ("Toys and Play," 120, quoted in Virno, 9). Notably, we are likely to attach a quality of innocence to children's experience of repetition in play, which distinguishes it from the adult player's drive for repetition (in gambling or videogame mania, for example). Although both groups locate intense pleasure in it, adult players seem to have more to lose in compulsively repetitive play, while children stand to benefit from it. This may go some way in accounting for why we do not speak of young children as play addicts.

psychologist Lev Vygotsky, by doing what they most want to do, children do what they most need to do ("Play and Its Role in the Mental Development of the Child," 13). One wonders what would happen without the cloak of pleasure: would uselessness prove so useful if it were not enjoyable—and hidden?

In this cursory treatment of the biological drive to play, we have seen that the process of doing amusing things, succeeding or failing, tweaking behavior, and then trying again that occurs under predominantly safe conditions is significant because of the underlying growth in fundamental *physical* capabilities, like the coordination of one's movements. Following Pellegrini, Dupius, and Smith, I would go further and contend that the environment in which a child carries out such instinctive activity is marked by freedom ("Play in Evolution and Development"). The reason that the immature are able to develop new behaviors and strategies with minimal stress, risk, or cost is that they are being protected and otherwise supported. Imagine that the young were not so vulnerable. If they were charged with the responsibility of meeting their own needs or contributing to their family's sustenance, they would not have the luxury to be playful. As it is, play generally takes place in the context of material abundance and security—gifted to children by adults who strive and sweat. Under this light, the playfulness of children is an acquired, not automatic, freedom. It is purchased by the work of others; the realization of the drive to play is not entirely inevitable but is somewhat susceptible to circumstance. The impulse is there but it must be met favorably. Thus, without capable and generous providers, individuals would be unlikely to experience a playful childhood, regardless of the biological impetus to act non-seriously.

A particularly cherished reward of the luxury of play is the ability to face life creatively. Constantly facing new situations and not yet familiar with the rules of physics or ethics, toddlers and young children are left to improvise. They figure things out as they go along and, importantly, when they mess up, they keep on going. Such

perseverance is possible in the march to adulthood in part because, on the occasions that kids do fail, loving grown-ups are (usually) around and (usually) inclined to cover over their mistakes. The security needed for playful growth—novel responses to novelty—includes emotional as well as physical resources, then. Referring to Marek Spinka's hypothesis about "training for the unexpected," Pellegrini, Dupius, and Smith elaborate on the special relation that holds between play and this desirable power of innovation:

> [I]n the safe context of play, animals appear to place themselves into unconventional and often disorienting positions. These novel behavioral situations afford opportunity for them to experiment with a variety of routines in relatively safe circumstances and generate novel, and possibly adaptive, responses. With practice in play, individuals become facile at enlisting these processes and thus they become more accessible in times of need, such as during an emergency. (269)

Their status as provided-for-beings allows children to spend their energy on play, and this proves to be a boon to them developmentally—in the short term as well as the long—as they are able to test themselves, experiment with a number of maneuvers, try out social roles, and develop a sense of self. They adopt attitudes of levity, given the low stakes. Or, put another way, children can afford to expend their energy because they are acting from a place of excess rather than attempting to cling to bare necessities. Here, I intend "excess" rather simply as the opposite of "deficiency." In short, the state of surplus is a state of freedom. And that freedom engenders further freedom by bringing about mastery.[44]

For the young, mastery—the hard fought and gradually won ability *to do*—is a source of pride and a way of being free in the world. Conquering even small things is a sign of maturity, evidence of the waxing of kids' power and the corresponding waning of their dependency. Erik Erikson proposes that a little girl or boy who has learned to take steps on her or his own grows in self-esteem, having internalized the identity of "one who can walk" (*Childhood and Society*, 235). Although it is not accurate to attribute

---

[44] Indeed, it is Freud who brings attention to the economy of play and its "yield of pleasure." See *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 13, and Derrida, *The Ear of the Other*, 68.

the growth of mastery solely to a child's play, pastimes do accord people the chance to get better at doing things until they perform them well with regularity. Aside from the taste of autonomy and the corresponding new identity that it offers, mastery is the power of predictability, the erasure of the fear of the unexpected. It is surely a relief to be released from experiencing objects as factors that predominate over one. For example, when the bicycle responds to my command, I am somehow freer than when it was an unwieldy force to which I was subjected. The same holds for situations. In cases in which mastery refers not to sovereignty over action but circumstance, play may turn symbolic in form.

I have noted how adults can encourage children's play by establishing conditions that free them physically to play; there is a flipside to dependency, however. Whatever figures (parental or otherwise) are raising a child, they nurture play indirectly by supplying food and shelter—opening up energy for expenditure in frivolous, yet preparatory, pursuits—and directly by the material objects that they choose for their young as toys. Adults also provide an emotional environment friendly to play by being playful themselves. These two aspects—the types of playthings supplied and the individual character of the adults—return us to the constricting side of the play equation. Children who are by and large consigned to spend their youths in the families into which they were born are dependent beings in that their identities are circumscribed by their immediate settings.

The sensible fact, which is normally unremarkable but worth making explicit here, is that the physical circumstance of people's upbringing bears significantly on their play experiences and their play futures. If girls and boys live in homes surrounded by woods, they will have the opportunity to play with natural objects. If they live in urban areas, they will have access to city streets, stoops, and (in the summertime) spraying fire hydrants. If they live in war-torn regions, they will be confined to the home or, if they are able to venture out, will have extraordinarily dangerous play objects at their disposal

in the debris. If children grow up in an era of highly developed technology and if they are given electronic gadgets and videogames, they may be tempted to stay indoors to play. And while mastering some singular ludic experience in the woods, streets, or living room is feasible, it is difficult to envision children of a certain age having the power to extend the boundaries of their play spheres by themselves. This is not to deny that children exercise a degree of choice *within* the settings in which they find themselves—which paths to take outdoors, which creatures to pick up and which to leave alone, what image or thing to represent with the broken tree branch—but to insist that, at the outer level, the place of their play and the range of their toys is outside of kids' control. They may be free in their play in that they are afforded safety and a surplus of goods, but they are physically constrained relative to their own abilities as well as their physical locales. Children's exposure to toys, games, and other players early in life sets play pathways, determining to an unquantifiable yet presumably large extent the forms of play and leisure they will seek out and enjoy as adults (Freysinger, 59). If their play proclivities are to change in their adulthood, it will be by deliberate intervention.

III. PSYCHOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS:

DISCOVERING SOCIAL CONSTRAINTS ON SELF, MAKING EMOTIONAL WIGGLE ROOM

I do not want to err by attributing too much power to the role of parents and caretakers in the shaping of children's identities, and therefore neglect the tremendous influence peers have on each other in their youth as well as the multitude of ways children subvert adult intentions in their amusements.[45] Nevertheless, I do want to

---

[45] Sutton-Smith and Chudacoff make these points splendidly. See especially, "Child Power and Identity" in *The Ambiguity of Play* and *Children at Play*, pp. 12, 147-150, and 208-211. The authors' discussions here do not occlude the darker and even cruel sides of children's play.

highlight the significance of adults' personalities in bringing about—or barring—play. As adults are responsible for the physical conditions of children's upbringing, so do they establish the emotional atmospheres in which kids are raised. Playful adults model, at least on occasion, what it is to have a good time and do something purposelessly. More importantly, they give children the permission—the emotional expanse—to play. This affirmation of the value of a spirit of adult playfulness and non-purposiveness echoes a tenet of the psychotherapist D.W. Winnicott.

Famous for his theory of toys as transitional objects, Winnicott writes in *Playing and Reality* of the intertwining of adults' and children's emotional freedom. The freedom to play goes both ways: Adults encourage children's play by valuing playfulness and being playful themselves. At the same time, children help adults enter into play, welcoming them into their quintessentially playful way of being, reminding them of the pleasure of non-instrumentality, and sanctioning their goofiness. Winnicott recalls a personal experience—in this case, not of using play as a therapeutic tool but of interacting lightheartedly with the five-year-old daughter of a patient—and states: "In the playing that Diana and I did together, playing without therapeutics in it, *I* felt free to be playful" (43, emphasis mine). Notably, Winnicott is concerned here to include a description of his own freedom. Focusing on one side of the relationship, we could say that the child's condition is linked to, if not predicated on, the grownup's state. Thus, Winnicott goes on to make the crucial observation that "[c]hildren play when the other person is able and free to be playful" (43-44). In finding that adult rigidity suppresses the ability to play in children, we encounter a perhaps surprising condition of *paidia*.[46] Kids are free to kid around to the degree that their friends and family members embody a willing spirit, an unencumbered play-drive, an abiding childlikeness. Play, which thrives on a certain looseness, suffers when adults are too uptight. This tautness or

---

[46] *Paidia* is the ancient Greek term for play; stemming from the word for child, *pais*, it is closely related to *paideia,* which means "education" or "upbringing."

strictness on the part of adults threatens to stifle kids' inclinations for fun. The capacity for self-consciousness grows along with the self. Inhibition lurks.

Let us continue by considering the theory of a child's inner, or psychic, development in slightly more detail, looking particularly to the interplay of perception of the world, experience of time, and the epiphenomenon of selfhood. Here I maintain that the younger children are the more psychologically free they are to express their desires and to enact anything in their play, without self-censorship or even self-awareness. This freedom of sensuous immediacy declines, however, with the refining of children's understanding of the world and their corresponding ability to make sense of time. Curiously, there is an inverse relation between fragmentation of time and unity of self. That is, at first a baby is unified with the whole of what surrounds her and yet she experiences each splice of time as a singular, ongoing unit, an unending (and incomprehensible) now. As she ages, she carves her "self" out from the world; this separation of self from other seems to correspond to her ability to knit together discrete moments into a continuous whole. It also significantly relates to the deferral of desires. Not until there is a self can there be self-repression.

In *Childhood and Society*, Erik Erikson describes the improvement in children's cognition of what constitutes the world. Initially, infants are unified with their circumstances; they cannot differentiate between themselves and what is around them, which is one way of explaining why a baby's crying intensifies when she hears another baby wail (Piaget, *Play, Dreams and Imitation in Childhood*, 7-8). Thus, infants first find themselves in an "autocosmos"—a world of self and immediate desire. Over time, as they make distinctions between what is inner and outer, their selves change. Here, they see themselves as inhabiting a "microsphere"—a slightly larger world that includes a few objects and a few other individuals whose rival desires warrant consideration. Eventually, they recognize a "macrosphere," which is simply the shared world of many people (*Childhood and Society*, 220-221).

This process of growth may be interpreted not only as the erection of boundaries but also as the expansion of rules: more and more regulations apply to individuals' conduct as the spheres widen and as engagement with others multiplies. After reaching the level of the macrosphere, children have obligations; they are required to make room for the different and often contrary desires of other people. Rather than being the center of attention all of the time, they are expected to adapt to others' preferences. This takes a number of forms of behavior, including maintaining silence while others speak and waiting patiently for their turn. In the case that children do mistreat others—grabbing what does not belong to them or kicking somebody when they do not get their way, say—they are held accountable. Punishment ensues. And so experiencing the world as limited to oneself ceases to be permissible as a child ages, enters adolescence, and eventually becomes an adult. This is seen clearly in the diagnosis of an egocentric person as narcissistic: she has failed to grow out of the autocosmos. That the narcissist is frozen in immaturity is evinced by the smallness of the sphere in which she seeks gratification: herself.

Alan Bass, a psychoanalyst who is known for his translations of Derrida, writes that "the relation to the thing is the possibility of the relation to the world" (165). Presumably, the corollary is true as well: how children see themselves vis-à-vis the world has implications for how they interact with objects. Thus, an especially pertinent detail in Erikson's account is that the function and identity of toys change with each stage of the trajectory of growth. During the autocosmos phase, there is nothing except a child's own body to serve as a toy. (The mother's body might count as an object of play but only insofar as it is viewed as an extension of a baby's self.) In the microsphere, with the child's ability to acknowledge the existence of independent entities, external things such as rattles, dolls, and balls become instruments of fun. Toys have a peculiarly fragile status at this point of development, however, because they abide by the laws of the "thing-world." Partially outside of the child's control, they may inexplicably break to

pieces or be confiscated (*Childhood and Society*, 221). In the outer reaches of the macrosphere, attained around nursery-school age, the content of play becomes more social because it is communicable and representable to others. As they mature, children are better able to respond to social codes and to decipher increasingly complex instructions. Furthermore, in the games they play with each other, they prove capable of giving themselves rules and acting as referees. Children are known to enforce the boundaries of their pretense, for example, by chiding their fellow players when they break character. In sum, children progress over time from exploring and playing with themselves to interacting with physical objects in a solitary fashion to experiencing play non-materially, collectively, and in a structure of regulation and responsibility.

Erikson's explanation of the constriction of the self in conjunction with the widening of external spheres is one way to account for changes to the arrangement of a person's psyche during childhood. We have seen that the self shrinks as it faces the limitations of social reality, and this affects a child's engagement with objects as toys. To Erikson's view we might add that of D.W. Winnicott, who works out the idea of differentiation and its implications for development through a theory of transitional objects. An infant comes to have and *use* her "first not-me possession" usually somewhere between the fourth and twelfth month (*Playing and Reality*, 1, 4). This accomplishment is predicated on the separation of self and object. The transitional object, as transitional, exists in the in between: it is neither in the infant's "inner psychic reality" nor in the "external world as perceived by two persons in common" (5). In this way, the transitional object is the substance of illusion—and il*lus*ion is, at root, a ludic condition. (In addition to this telling etymology, keep in mind Winnicott's claim that illusory experiences carry over into adulthood in the forms of art and religion (3).) While the transitional object corresponds to the transition *between* "the thumb and the teddy bear" (2), it might at the same time *be* the thumb or stuffed animal. As Winnicott makes

clear from the start, he cares less about the nature or identity of the things, which serve as transitional objects, than in their use (xii, 3).

Whereas the mother's breast represented a *subjective object* for the infant—an object that the infant related to subjectively and even somehow identified with as an extension of his own body—the infant who has developed to the point of having a particular organization of the ego is able to relate to an object as separate from his self (80). He does this on the basis of a change to the reality principle. That is, as he sacrifices his fantasy of omnipotence, he gains access to things that objectively exist in the world. By alienating things that he takes to be part of himself—"subjective objects" he projects onto the world—he transforms them into objects with potential use-value. Winnicott insists on a set of transitional objects and phenomena in between these relation and use stages. He describes this maturation in terms of destruction and survival: according to him, "after 'subject relates to object' comes 'subject destroys object' (as it becomes external); and then may come '*object survives* destruction by the subject'" (90, original emphasis). It is only after finding that objects exist after being destroyed—i.e., after being "placed outside the area of omnipotent control" (ibid.)—that the infant can interact with them as useful things.[47] Here then is one site of expansion through constriction. A young person gains access to greater power through objects in the narrowing of her or his self.

While from an external position we might regard infants as inhabiting a carefree world of constant provision, subjectively, babies are limited to their environments—or, more simply, *are* their environments—to the extent that they have not yet distinguished self from other. Their nascent selfhood is not only dictated by their physical circumstance. Until they can mediate them, they are determined by their desires. Despite whatever inclinations we might have to treat *nunc stans* experiences as unequivocally

---

[47] The *use* of things implies to me a tool- rather than a toy-relation.

wonderful in a mystical sort of way, let us imagine how frustrating it might be for infants to experience life as a series of eternal nows. Babies who have no other recourse than crying when they want to be fed, cleansed, or held are vulnerable in their dependency on others. Locked in a state of non-comprehension, they are likely to face each moment of being hungry, dirty, or alone as an unending one—until the pain of dissatisfaction is abruptly undone and a new fragment of time starts.

The decline in immediacy as a way of experiencing life occurs gradually in the course of childhood, and with considerable adult aid and socializing force. Although play is one field in which children are apt to assert themselves and practice autonomy, maturing entails the compulsion to conform to norms in nearly all spheres of behavior. Writing explicitly in terms of freedom, function, and purpose, Lawrence K. Frank addresses the process by which an infant is transformed into a participant in the social order. His account, at length, reads:

> Adults expect, and may coerce him [the newborn infant], if necessary, to transform these organic needs and functional capacities into goal-seeking, purposive conduct addressed to deferred or symbolic consummations, thereby establishing new ways of relating himself to the world by a reciprocal, circular process. … The baby thereby surrenders some of his physiological autonomy and self-regulation, becoming increasingly responsive in his functional processes to the external world and its requirements as he transforms organic needs into purposive strivings. His eating is regulated, not by his changing blood sugar level, but by family meals; his elimination is governed, not by pressures internally, but by the designated place and time; his sleep by parental schedules.
> Thus the child is freed from coercion by his own organic needs and can increasingly replace early patterns by more mature patterns that enable him to cope with the world purposefully. …
> In these transformations of organic needs and functionings, this relinquishing of organic autonomy to accept social patterning and regulations of his physiological functioning, we may observe the first steps in the process of maturation … (576-577)

Frank slips in this passage between describing the newborn's state as free and coerced. On the one hand, the infant who abides by patterns dictated by social norms is freed from the coercion of bodily needs. Being out of diapers certainly has its advantages. On the other hand, the baby relinquishes his physiological autonomy in accepting the requirements of the external, striving world. He is more regulated than before, when he

was merely responsive to his instantaneous desires. Notably, we also see Frank define

maturity as the acquisition of purposiveness, which is an essential quality of work, not

play.

As they age and run up more and more against the restrictions of reality, the

young will have to cope with unmet needs. They are liable to turn to play as one of the

means of self-cure—to the extent that they may be said to have a "self"—once they can

no longer get by with living immediately. In other words, separation (of self and world)

accompanies ego-synthesis; deferral of desires trails the internal division of the psyche;

and these partitions and transformations affect children's relationship to both time and

play (and to time through play). Among its other traits, maturity means having an

increasingly continuous sense of oneself over time and having the ability to interact with

other people and things in instrumental *and* instrumentally non-instrumental manners.

"No one has met a child under three who wanted to do something a few days

hence." That comical insight of Vygotsky captures this characteristic of the very young,

namely that they want what they want without delay. Over and above reason or rational

discourse, children make recourse to play when the realization of their desires is

interrupted or altogether stunted. This remedy is itself, of course, unplanned. Thus, in

his treatment of play, pain, and planning, Vygotsky stresses the spontaneity of the play

solution:

> At preschool age special needs and incentives arise that are very important for
> the whole of the child's development and that are spontaneously expressed in
> play. In essence, there arise in a child of this age many unrealizable tendencies
> and immediately unrealizable desires. A very young child tends to gratify his
> desires at once. Any delay in fulfilling them is hard for him and is acceptable
> only within certain narrow limits; no one has met a child under three who
> wanted to do something a few days hence. Ordinarily, the interval between the
> motive and its realization is extremely short. I think that if there were no
> development in preschool years of needs that cannot be realized immediately,
> there would be no play. (2-3)

Temper tantrums provide ample evidence of the difficulty children experience in

accepting that their desires go unfulfilled, even for a short interval. Their ability to

countenance answers like "no" or "wait" increases with time. (Everyday life will afford toddlers plenty of "practice" at not getting their way. A related fact of development is that time will have to be set aside for their amusement. I.e., eventually, once they inhabit the workaday world, they will have to plan to play.) Whether or not Vygotsky is justified in thinking that play would not exist without immediately unrealizable needs, play does prove to be a moderating force. What grownups, desperate for peace and quiet, sometimes do as a deliberate move—providing disruptive kids with toys as tools for distraction—children may readily seek out for themselves. Play is a naturally arising way to temper the angry disappointment of unmet desire.[48] It is the language of children's feelings and a safe means of total self-expression (Landreth et al., 47).

Whereas adults may turn to the free and desultory exploration of ideas in talk therapy, children of a certain age are liable to work out traumatic occurrences by acting upon toys. Replaying events allows children to deal with scenarios that they are incapable of processing otherwise, either because they lack the words to express themselves or because the reality is too threatening to be confronted directly. In representing situations with toys, children externalize their feelings (49). It is the disguise, the dissimulation, that makes this expression safe. Rather than reenact something exactly as it happened, kids may choose to imagine alternate outcomes, which would have been more pleasing to them. Whether a faithful or creative reproduction of fact, the play's overall effect is to give children space for their sentiments—newfound emotional wiggle room. Play is, as Freud would have it, a venting mechanism. It offers an escape valve for impulses that exceed the confines of reality (Rubin, 702).

---

[48] It is not as if an infant waiting to be fed decides to distract herself from hunger by playing a game. Thus, a certain threshold of functioning needs to be reached before a child can counter frustrated desires in play. Vygotsky places this level of ability at the time of preschool, or around three years of age.

A famous example of reli(e)ving pain in play is that of Freud's grandson, Ernst, who at one-and-a-half repeats a game of his own invention. Memorialized as the *fort/da* ("gone / there") case in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, the little boy deals with his mother's absence by playing with a spindle (*BPP*, 13-17). Playing with an object that he can physically control—sending the bobbin away (while making the sound "o-o-o-o" rather than pronouncing the actual word "*fort*") and bringing the bobbin back at will (uttering a joyful "da" on its return)—enables him to cope with the emotional fallout of a reality he could not determine, that is, a mother with a schedule of her own.[49] As Erikson says, "[W]ith the use of a full-length mirror, [the boy] plays 'going away' from himself and returning to himself. He is now both the person who is being left and the person who leaves" (*Childhood and Society*, 217). This unconscious and multivalent symbolism is a display of power. Beyond the physical control he wields over the literal toy object, Ernst asserts himself as he represents the situation, determining when to make the spindle leave and when to allow it to return. At the same time, he gets to exchange places and experience the autonomous pleasure of being the one to leave and come back. The child is not alone in trying to make sense of the matter, though. The multiple interpretations of this scene, which *Freud* wagers and then rejects, point to a further plane of play. As Derrida illuminates, "[Freud's] own writing, his own deportment in this text is doing *fort/da*" (*The Ear of the Other*, 70). The hide-and-seek of Freud's hermeneutic efforts as they are applied to his grandson's game is, in Derrida's thought, play without limit.

Play helps to shape children's identities; it also reflects children's inner lives, particularly in difficult moments. Over and above these roles, play proves to be a means of *refiguring the self*, not only in childhood but *throughout* an individual's development. I therefore maintain that what psychologists say with respect to the young—that "[p]lay can be viewed as the process through which the total self of the child is *created*, *expressed*,

---

[49] The *in*ability to respond to distress in this way is referred to as "play disruption."

and *recreated*"—holds for adults as well (Landreth et al., 48, emphasis mine). I am surely not the first to point out that re-creation is possible through recreation.[50]

Hannah Arendt's concept of natality, or the freedom to begin anew, resembles the ever-unfinished growth experienced in psychoanalysis. In the volume of *Female Genius* devoted to the originator of the psychoanalytic play technique Melanie Klein, Julia Kristeva addresses the play of forces at work in play and therapy. Expounding at length on freedom and rebirth, Kristeva writes:

> In Winnicott's writings, the adjective *free* is used as a synonym for an 'inner life that must be perpetually re-created,' one that operates in tandem with an external life that must always be internalized. In Freud, the word *free* essentially signifies a resistance to the twin tyrants of external reality and the desires of the drives. After Klein and Winnicott, the term has come to mean something else: *free* means to internalize the outside, provided that this outside (the mother, to begin with), allows for play and allows itself to play. In sum, at the end of the analysis that has been terminated but that remains infinite, and because we have revealed freedom at the cost of our desires, we find ourselves not only mortal but 'full of birth,' to come back again to Hannah Arendt's idea, in the sense that we are capable of creating a psychic inner life that is to be forever replenished. (185)

Growing up means continuously adjusting one's self-conception to the Heraclitean reality of the surrounding world. The sheer flux of time and energy requires synthesizing acts of selfhood. Thus, an adult is made in adulteration: as desires are mixed with duties, pure sensuous immediacy is shed. A person in middle age as much as in youth is used to incorporating what is apposite until it is his own, seeking to join with what he cannot beat only provided it is beatable, which is to say playable. This delicate harmonizing of inner being with outer circumstance takes a variety of forms. What Kristeva specifies, though, is that playfulness is the *sine qua non* of this freedom. A person is only free in internalizing what is outside when that external element itself allows for play. What perhaps follows from this is the claim that being without play is a fettered way of life. Forces that are hostile to play ought to be resisted. Reflexively, one may turn back to play (as in play therapy) as a means of this resistance.

---

[50] See, for example, Erikson, *Toys and Reasons*, 213.

What I have attempted to show in this section on play and psychological and emotional development is that a sacrifice of one type of freedom makes room for the expression of other, more potent forms, which are more adequate to the world as it really is. A child displays control in deftly interacting with external objects; furthermore, when she internalizes outside forces, she engages in acts of self re-creation. She grows in power physically and psychologically, and while this growth comes at the cost of the immediate fulfillment of desire and the fragmentation of self, it brings enhancements. Namely, development in these arenas allows for a sense of continuity over time, greater independence, and the more sophisticated play accorded in the manipulation of concepts.

IV. Intellectual Development and Diversion:

The Constraint of Accommodation and the Freedom of Assimilation

We may slide into this section on cognitive play quite easily given the extent to which the emotional and intellectual expressions of play are intertwined. Children like Freud's grandson may find emotional release in play acts but in doing so they draw from the developing capacities of their minds, specifically their ability to represent the world symbolically. As they move away from the sensorimotor period of development and as they grow in representational intelligence, they are less tied to the "here-and-now." They can reflect about the past and project onto the future (Harwood et al., 244). Whether for sheer fun or the remedying of pain, children have considerable freedom in how they exercise their imaginations. With expanded brain functioning, they are increasingly able to play around with concepts and actively manipulate symbols. They have by and large passed through the stage of accommodating their understanding to external truths; they are ready to make ideas serve them, assimilating them to their

purposes. Even as children slowly move away from being determined by desires, however, they face the constraint of their "conceptual circumstances."

Children are "bound" to imitate the people they face on a consistent basis and this is a matter of intellectual, as well as physical, determination. While at particular moments babies certainly do refrain from copying the mannerisms of those around them, and although it is more than plausible that children are idiosyncratic because of the unique ways they *assemble* the factors that they adopt, mimicry as an element of their formation appears to be an inescapable fact. Regardless of whether it is automatic or learned, imitation is a developmental technique and, Piaget says, the prelude to (actual) play.[51] According to his theory of accommodation and assimilation, children develop as they bring their thinking in line with reality—altering their concepts—and as they manipulate the world around them—acting on things as their mind dictates. This admixture of adjustment and exertion, of response and innovation, turns out to be a balancing of *imitation* and *jeu*.

Is it characteristic of play for it to be mimetic, or is play, as Piaget maintains, distinct from and somehow beyond imitation? The now famous play scholar Brian Sutton-Smith shows in his 1966 article critiquing Piaget what is at stake in this (supposed) separation. According to Sutton-Smith, who favors a view in which play is *intellectually generative*, Piaget's theory falls short by relying on a copyist notion of imitation. That is, Piaget situates (symbolic) play after the stage of imitation; by doing so, he presents play as limited to or constrained by the images already attained through children's accommodation to—or copying of—reality. Sutton-Smith writes that for Piaget "the encapsulated images derived from accommodation determine the character of the activity. Play merely diversifies the symbols" ("Piaget on Play: A Critique," 106).

---

[51] There is debate over the learned or instinctual nature of imitation. At the beginning of *Play, Dreams and Imitation in Childhood*, for example, Piaget emphasizes his concurrence with the view that imitation is neither hereditary nor non-intentional (5). In other words, it is active, not automatic.

Sutton-Smith decries the related point in Piaget's theory that children grow out of play as they are socialized (Sutton-Smith, 108; Piaget, *Play, Dreams and Imitation in Childhood*, 168). Thus, he not only takes issue with the status of play relative to imitation but calls into question the place attributed to play in the course of an individual's overall development within Piaget's schema.

What is Sutton-Smith's position? While he makes clear that his aim is not to provide a different theoretical framework in which to consider play, Sutton-Smith does convey his esteem for play as a constructive faculty (110). One senses that out of a deep respect for play Sutton-Smith wants to elevate it and see it upheld as a robust capacity independent of other faculties. Like Johan Huizinga and Winnicott, he views play as carrying cultural and psychological significance throughout a person's life. Rather than being supplanted by reason, play takes on new forms in the stage of adulthood. With age, people play differently from the way they did as children, but they still play. They play at festivals. They play at communication. They play at sex. In Sutton-Smith's eyes, play is one of life's lasting features—and not another transient phase (109).

In his response to Sutton-Smith's critique, Piaget seeks to clarify his own position, insisting that he does not regard play as subordinate to imitation. In short, he disavows holding the ideas that Sutton-Smith attributes to him. To correct the misunderstanding, Piaget rehearses his stance that symbolic play occurs among children one-and-a-half to two years in age, which follows the period of their sensorimotor activities and play. This is relevant given the relation between symbols and concepts and between concepts and imitation. And so he writes that "[m]ental imagery in particular is the product of interiorized imitation" ("Response to Brian Sutton-Smith," 112). When children "interiorize" imitation, they engage in representation. This mental process is activated at a further stage of development when they rely on the concepts of imitation in their play. Piaget's refutation of Sutton-Smith's interpretation of his work may therefore come through more clearly in this statement: "[because play as the assimilation

of reality to the self] is symbolic it needs signifiers, and it borrows them either from language or from the only other source of symbols, that is to say, gestural or interiorized imitation" (ibid.). Assimilation—the "deformation and subordination of reality to the desires of the self"—involves language or imitation, but this does not make language or imitation secondary to play (ibid.). For Piaget, subsequence in order does not equate subordination in rank.

Is the copyist view of play as imitation, like Sutton-Smith suggests, problematically deterministic in that it prevents the unhindered exercise of children's wishes and ideas? Is his framework by contrast liberating in that it allows play an independently constructive role? Touching upon the debate between Piaget and Sutton-Smith opens up a range of questions about the nature of the limitation of imitation. If children begin their play lives by mimicking the gestures, words, and attitudes of the others around them, are they unfree? How could children be expected at an early stage of development to do genuinely and thoroughly new things, however open, unafraid, and non-self-censoring children may be? With what resources would they play around, what materials would they manipulate in their play, except those already available to them in their immediate circumstances, in the examples of the lives of the adults and other children they know? And is there any indication that this setup changes in adulthood? Are adults able to break free of everyday concepts in their play any more than children? Perhaps, then, the practice of imitation is not a dire limitation but one that is consistent with the experience of new and limitless possibilities. It is not necessary to worry about an impoverishing of the play-drive on this basis, given children's creative potential to combine the raw resources at hand in wildly innovative and unpredictable ways.

V. CONCLUSION:

CONTEMPORARY CONCERNS AND THE DANGERS OF INSTRUMENTALIZING PLAY

This chapter has been premised on the hope that understanding the deep worth that play holds for children will extend to the reevaluation of the place and purpose of play in adulthood. In coming to recognize several specific ways in which play is a developmental good, we open ourselves to the importance of deliberately seeking play as an element in the ongoing shaping of our adult selves. The gathering and recollection of insights from classic developmental psychologists may also better position us to rethink the ways in which we encourage play in children today. To many, modern trends in the culture and commercialization of children's play are dismaying. Numerous factors contribute to the transformation that psychologists and others observe in the play patterns of the majority of twenty-first-century American children. These include smaller and less extended families, the lack of access to outdoor space that is deemed sufficiently safe for independent play, toys that are too complex, and time that is too structured.

A combination of anecdotal evidence, scholarly studies, and journalistic reports suggest that children's play is becoming largely overdetermined in nature. It is less imaginative, less simple, less spontaneous. In short, it is less free. The diminution in "free play" (used here as a technical term for unstructured play) is occurring while—or because—kids are surrounded by an abundance of toys and games with educational justification and operational constraint. What happened to toys that come without instructions? Children may prefer the *boxes* for expensive toys to the toys themselves because a cardboard box can become many things, while the toy is programmed for only one purpose (Tim Brown, "Tales of Creativity and Play," 9:20).

There is a sad irony here. Well-meaning family members, friends, and educators want to give children every advantage and so they supply them with highly purposed

activities and things. These gestures are self-undermining because they stifle opportunities for purposeless play, the experience of which proves hugely beneficial. Evidence and first-hand testimonies suggest that children might be better off playing self-regulated pickup games of soccer in neighborhood streets than attending adult-organized league practices, to take one example. Melinda Wenner, drawing on the expertise of David Elkind, writes, "Parents should let children be children—not just because it should be fun to be a child but because denying youth's unfettered joys keeps kids from developing into inquisitive, creative creatures …" ("The Serious Need for Play," 29). Following the course that Elkind recommends would require that adults esteem the intrinsic goodness of purposeless play and *trust* that play's secondary rewards (the fostering of emotional intelligence, problem-solving skills, self-regulation, etc.) will eventually be manifested in their children's character.

Recognizing the difficulty of measuring and qualifying the occurrence of play among adults, it is nevertheless possible to speculate that the decline in *their* experience of unstructured time is partially responsible for the over-programming of their children's lives. As we saw, Winnicott explains that children benefit from the implicit permission to play that playful parents provide. Mothers and fathers, aunts and uncles, cousins, neighbors, teachers, and loving friends who are themselves playful encourage the experience of freedom in the youth of the community. This freedom is a nurturing freedom that brings about a multitude of good things—like creativity and cooperation—in the long run. Adult figures are doing something harmful, however, when they continuously anchor play activities to learning objectives, schedule too many organized and adult-supervised games, and deprive kids the room and unfettered hours for spontaneous, self-directed, and risky fun. Again, such trends may belie adults' own anxieties about things like status and accomplishment, intelligence and earning-potential. They reveal the adult inability to allow children's play to be anything other than functional (Erikson, *TR*, 214), the way that "the older generation has [in general]

always wanted play to be rational so that it will lead a child to some beneficial end such as wisdom and proficiency" (Chudacoff, 13). Perhaps if adults were more comfortable with the pleasures of play for themselves, they would not have to instrumentalize play in the young. It seems, then, that another motivation for thoughtfully cultivating playful attitudes and experiences well into adulthood is to be reminded of the inherent value of play. We can take joy in letting children experience purposelessness entirely for its own sake. Rather than preclude them, this preserves the benefit of secondary traits of play. Treading the paradox that productive outcomes are best found when they are not sought at all is a precarious balance to strike.

In sum, we have seen that children experience freedom and constraint in various ways as they mature physically, psychologically, and intellectually. Play both affects and is affected by the shifting relationship between being fettered and being free. Kids may discover rules by repeated playing and they may rely on play to break out of displeasing rules. Their engagement in amusing activities may be conditioned by freedom, as in the free provision of resources, at the same time that it is determined by necessity, as in the circumscriptions of their settings. It is not as simple as saying that the liberties children find in play lead to new limitations or that constrictions are consistently accompanied by the loosening of necessity. Freedom and constraint go hand in hand. They are neither strictly causal nor correlative but rather are traits that are co-determined and interpenetrating. The following chapter further evinces the dialectical relationship that holds within—and between—movements of play. There, I will step forward from the symbolic stage in the trajectory of youths' play development and turn to adult and youth engagement in fantasy. Taking online role-playing games as representative of the over-reflective pole of aestheticism, I will analyze the freedom of acting as an avatar as well as the counterintuitive constraints of living in worlds of possibility.

Chapter 2

Avatars, Agency, and the Limited Possibility of Fantasy

One of the traditional understandings of freedom takes freedom to be the absence of constraint. Recall Hobbes' paradigmatic case of water, unhindered by rocks or dams, which is free to flow (*Leviathan*, II.21, pp. 139-140). There is a certain intuitive sensibility to this stance that freedom is freedom from impediments. Turning from a natural substance such as water to human subjects, we could easily admit that people who are physically locked up—or people who are somehow psychologically blocked— suffer from impaired wills.

Holding these or similar presuppositions about limitation, we may be inclined to broach virtual worlds as worlds of unparalleled freedom. Open and expanding, online space admits of actions unsupported in the real world. The constraints of natural laws— the limitations on what we can do physically—as well as the strictures of social mores— the limitations on what we can do ethically—seem to be loosened in electronic spheres. Beyond heightened or altered agency, there are questions of identity to explore. Digitally mediated play allows for personal experimentation through the creation of avatars. By divorcing who you "are" online from physical reality, electronic forms of play enable selfhood to take new shapes and meanings. Often, this occurs without the constraints of commitment. Online, change comes easily.

Whether by virtue of fantasy or Internet capabilities, a game such as *World of Warcraft* may appear to offer the freedom of infinite possibility. I think this would be a mistaken view, however, on two counts. One misapprehension concerns freedom. It is not that freedom is found in infinite possibility. Rather, it is the lack of any boundaries at all, the total absence of impossibility, that is constraining. Having no rules in place prevents game play. The second point needing correction concerns the impossibility of

total possibility. Fantasies are always tethered to reality not least because the people doing the fantasizing are real: even virtual play does not severe this tie. Marks of actuality are bound to appear and to place a limit on the very thinking of what is possible. For this reason, I will treat *World of Warcraft* as a form of entertainment that is, at least partially, reality-based and—what is more interesting—reality-replicating.

In this chapter I will seek to locate specific iterations of freedom in such a contemporary play form and to assess its adequacy and potency for a life of flourishing. To those ends, I will consider the relation between fantasy, freedom, and escapism. Is fantasy the means of escapism? Is escapism an incomplete freedom? Is escapism what people are seeking in the first place through *World of Warcraft*? What would it mean to be successful in experiencing escape in that pastime? In trying on new roles through online persona and in delimiting spheres of action of relative consequence, are players enjoying a weak freedom apart from real life? Or could we affirm gaming alongside or in place of psychoanalysis as a therapeutic milieu in which to confront and challenge the self? As they gather in these realms in droves and devote hours and hours to cultivating these imaginary spaces, often over years and years, are gamers reshaping reality and thus exerting a particular power—the freedom of influence or resistance, say? Could we say more strongly that by participating in this online activity, they are contributing to the improvement of reality (not merely changing the "normal" world but making it better)? On the one hand, it would be morally significant if they were developing our shared, everyday world in positive ways through their play. Such a finding might move us to advocate for the fostering of the faculty of fantasy in general and this virtual way of exercising fantasy in particular. It might also cause us to reevaluate practices of fantasy as capable of freeing us from the deleterious factors and constraints of the (outside-the-game) world. On the other hand, it might not matter if people's role-playing engagements do not intersect with a moral mission. That is, it may be that the entertainment offered by *World of Warcraft* fulfills its purpose best when it functions as a

release and not as a social or individual improvement-mechanism. Why burden this
sphere with positive, ethical duties?[52]

In what follows I will make the argument that the Massively Multiplayer Online
Role-Playing Game (MMORPG) of *World of Warcraft* allows players to begin to process
difficulties of our shared, actual world through two means: avatars and in-game agency.
Furthermore, this particular enactment of fantasy displays an interstitiality similar to
that of the mental activity of fantasy. What I mean is that the indeterminacy of action,
which marks a person's relationship to her online character or avatar, parallels the non-
specifiable, partially free and partially controlled process by which ideas or images
combine within the space of free association. Thus, people may expect to find a degree
of freedom as they engage in fantasy and send their imaginations into overdrive.
Through play a person is free to renounce, for a time, her responsibilities and to act
wildly, as an adventurer. An individual is free to forget the perhaps painful ways in
which his identity is ordinarily circumscribed, breaking out of a wheelchair, say, by
visiting in his mind's eye a world in which he can run, jump, and fly (Johnson, 267).
These are necessarily partial and unsustainable freedoms, however, in that experiences
of fantasy offer limited agency for a limited time. Return to the real world is always
imminent. *Which* "you" returns is of no trivial concern. It matters not only how online
gaming might fail to shape selves but also how it might prove to *reshape* selves. In
principle, there is no guarantee that entertaining virtual fantasies will preserve *or*
pervert the individuals who play (through) the avatars. The possibility that digitally-

---

[52] A class of games under the acronym ARG—which stands for "alternate reality game"—is
emerging. The author, game designer, and ARG-advocate Jane McGonigal defines this play set
simply but forcefully as the "*antiescapist* game" (*Reality is Broken*, 125, original emphasis). The
proposition at the core of the ARG movement is that the world can be improved through gaming.
When the traditional structure of games is imposed on real-life issues, for example in applying
arbitrary limits to the completion of a task, problem-solving becomes more fun—and more
possible. The pleasure of the ludically-formulated challenge attracts players whose energy is then
leveraged for good. This occurs in a range of social settings, at home in games like "Chore Wars"
and in public in games like "Cruel 2 B Kind (C2BK)." ARGs are deliberately designed to reinvent
reality. Does their purposiveness, however admirable, taint or even negate their playfulness,
though?

mediated fantasies will yield no change or that they will bring about bad change is part of the limitation of play at this second pole of the aesthetic stage.

Insofar as players "escape" accountability—as long as their actions are constrained to have significance primarily for the virtual world—the freedom, which *World of Warcraft* offers, is relatively weak. The moral development of a person is truncated when an online space becomes what Douglas Hedley calls a "substitute domain for the empirical world" (74). For ethical selfhood to emerge in the robust Kierkegaardian sense, a person must act in the local, everyday, embodied sphere of the real. This will push us to consider the further hypothesis, which will be taken up in chapter 3, that there is an intrinsic relationship between freedom and ethics—not only in the Kantian sense that a person must be free in order to be held morally responsible but in the stance expressed by Judge Wilhelm in *Either/Or* that a person is not free until she is an ethical self with grounding commitments. Limiting oneself to the universal rules of morality in fully embodied and socially embedded actions is more freedom-enhancing than withdrawing into the world of one's mind, whatever scope of possibilities is possible there.

This chapter unfolds as follow. In the first section I offer an introduction to the concept of fantasy that stresses its status as a free mental activity. Although my understanding of fantasy is informed by Aristotle's notion of *phantasia* and Kant's account of the free play of the imagination, I frame the discussion by foregrounding the ideas of the nineteenth-century German philosopher and Protestant theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher. I choose to focus on Schleiermacher in part because of his esteem for fantasy and because he affords fantasy a substantive role in the formation of the self. His philosophy gives us a way of thinking about imaginative sense perception that is connected to infinite possibility alongside world building. In addition to setting up a basis for understanding the online activities of modern players, this presentation of fantasy as a mental capacity serves to align the chapter's discussion with the second pole

of Kierkegaard's aesthetic category, that of over-reflection. As both Kierkegaard and his expositors set forth, the notion of the reflective aesthetic entails the free play of the imagination to the detriment of decisive action (Kierkegaard, *CUP*, 253, and Taylor, *KPA*, 169-170). A second introductory section describes the MMORPG genre broadly. From there, I move to a description and two-tiered analysis of the specific MMORPG *World of Warcraft*. In examining the themes of avatars and agency, I consider the relationship between rules and reality and I highlight the status of rules vis-à-vis possibility. The conclusion offers a final look at how this contemporary form of fantasy role-playing may or may not prove to be escapist and whether, to the extent that it is escapist, it is unhealthily so.

I. A Philosophical Sense of Fantasy

The following brief review of the notion and function of fantasy (*Phantasie*) in several of Schleiermacher's works will provide a basic philosophical grounding for the subsequent discussion of MMORPGs and virtual play.[53] By referencing a few key passages in *On Human Freedom* (1793), *Speeches on Religion* (1799, the first edition), and the *Monologen* (1800), I will set forth a working definition of *Phantasie* that includes its own interplay of liberty and law. Moreover, I will make connections between *Phantasie*, ideation, individuality, and infinity, which will prove helpful for the analysis of the limitations and appeal of the virtual space of *World of Warcraft*. Lastly, this section on Schleiermacher's use of *Phantasie* will serve to reinforce the caveat that, while I am treating fantasy with respect to the aesthetic, fantasy does not relate exclusively to that sphere but has relevance in psychological, ethical, and religious areas as well.[54]

---

[53] *Phantasie* is to be distinguished from *Einbildungskraft*, the term for "imagination" that includes senses of strength (*Kraft*), formation or cultivation (*Bildung*), image (*Bild*), and even unity (*ein*).

To begin, let us turn to *On Human Freedom*, where Schleiermacher defines fantasy in terms of cognitive action and the association of ideas. He gives a relatively clear sense of what fantasy is when he writes at the end of Part I: "Through fantasy, upon which every association of ideas depends, even the particular actions of our cognitive powers are enhanced" (26). This description of fantasy—as what enables *every* association of ideas on the one hand and as what enhances *particular* mental actions on the other— belongs to a section of the text in which Schleiermacher is concerned to account for the particularization of cognitive acts. In showing that individual minds take individual pathways, he turns to the notion of desire. It is true, he maintains, that fantasy has within its grasp the "whole of present representations," and yet through fantasy we do not re-present all of the images available to ourselves at once. Rather, impulse determines the singular combination of ideas at which a person arrives (ibid.). Here Schleiermacher seems to be thinking quite broadly about fantasy as a faculty of the mind, making reference to the differences in people's memories, the types of investigations into which people enter, and the way people interpret and respond to propositions. Why, he wonders, does one person plunge into religious investigations while another person does not? Why do people derive different conclusions from the same premises? In short, out of the many possible courses of action that the mind may take, why does one in particular emerge? His response is that affording attention to "the completion of *a* train of representations, to the exclusion of all others at that particular time" is a reaction to desire (27, emphasis mine). It is as if the specificity of a representation and the specificity of an impulse tie together the faculties of fantasy and

---

[54] In her work on psychoanalysis and creativity, the scholar Lois Oppenheim is careful to draw attention to the connections between therapy and art. In the introduction to *Imagination from Fantasy to Delusion*, she claims that the expression of the imagination "may or may not be aesthetic." Continuing, she writes that "[f]antasy in art (art as fantasy) entails the externalizing of emotion, desire, and conflict, conscious and unconscious. So, too, does psychoanalysis, with its foundation in the fantasy of both transference and, in its overlap with memory, reconstruction" (xii). It seems, then, that the notions of fantasy and the aesthetic (in its usual, i.e. non-Kierkegaardian, sense) cleave together but also pull apart.

desire. In this view, fantasy is an irreducibly individual phenomenon. It is not experienced collectively. It is not shared. The unique direction one's mind takes in exercising the power of fantasy shows something, then, about the current nature of individual selfhood even apart from the self's future cultivation and its harmonious interaction with others.[55]

We may couple this explanation about the associative spontaneity of fantasy with a claim about its lawfulness, which falls in Part IV of *On Freedom*. Fantasy does not escape regulation altogether but "[acts] according to laws peculiar to itself" (134). It is as if the internal laws of fantasy bind its activity so that fantasy "does not extend its associations beyond itself" (ibid.). In short, there is freedom within fantasy to combine different ideas—as evinced in the spontaneity of association—but this freedom is itself contained.[56] Fantasy thus abides by its own rules in a self-constraining fashion. By presenting fantasy as a faculty that is in control of itself, Schleiermacher departs from the view of Kant, who in §28 of *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* describes *Phantasie* as the involuntary use of the imagination.

Schleiermacher in this section of *On Freedom* approaches freedom under one aspect—that of ideal particular actions (as opposed to the aspect of real particular actions). In his discussion of mental actions, he addresses the issue of appearance and draws a connection between fantasy and indirect images, or images that are distinct from what actually appears before one's eyes. The faculty of the understanding initiates a linking of appearances, which stands in contrast to the "work of fantasy." The series that fantasy creates "consist not even of actual appearances but only of images of appearances" (ibid.). The concept of *phantasia*, as first named by Aristotle, is suggestive

---

[55] An implication of the individual quality of fantasy is that, like intuition, fantasy resists systematization.

[56] Galen Strawson in his article "Mental Ballistics or the Involuntariness of Spontaneity" (2003) advocates for the converse understanding, taking spontaneity to be a mark of the *involuntariness* of thoughts. As he notes, Philo made the point in the first century C.E. in this way: "[A] man's thoughts are sometimes not due to himself but come without his will" (quoted in Strawson, 233).

of appearance—albeit appearance of a certain sort.[57] Trading in *images of* appearances rather than in direct perception, fantasy is removed from what really appears by one degree (and from what really *is* by two degrees, to complete the thought Platonically). These are basic features of fantasy but are nonetheless worth drawing out: Fantasy represents images to the mind that are absent, and fantasy remains related to reality in combining images that are derived from the real world in unseen ways. In presencing what is not actually present, fantasy nears mimesis or imitation, dissimulation, make-believe, pretense, and even delusion and escapism.[58]

The mind is active in both perceiving and processing images. It is not simply that the mind takes snapshots of phenomena that exist out in the world; the mind also allows for, if not completely directs, the interplay of its inner pictures. The Schleiermacher scholar Albert Blackwell emphasizes these dual aspects of mind and activity as he explains that fantasy is directed toward *ideal actions*, or "the activity of our mental world" (Introduction, *On Freedom*, xxxi).[59] The faculty of fantasy acts upon images in melding and moving them. Furthermore, it is through such actions of the mind that we come to act on the external world, affecting other subjects. Regarding causality in this way harkens back to Schleiermacher's striking claim in Part I that "we cannot affect others except through representations" (27), while challenging the idea mentioned above that fantasy's freedom does not spill out of its realm. This mirrors, I believe, the discrepancy between the qualities that Schleiermacher wishes to attribute to intuition.

---

[57] Jessica Moss's thorough and careful study *Aristotle on the Apparent Good: Perception,* Phantasia, *Thought, and Desire* (2012) provides the following definition of *phantasia*, founded on textual evidence from Aristotle's *On the Soul*, *On Dreams*, and *On Memory*: "*phantasia* is essentially the capacity to have an experience very like the perception of some *x* but which is not directly caused by perceptual contact with any actual *x* (where *x* is a proper, common, or incidental perceptible – e.g. pinkness, roundness, a pig). It is a capacity for making present to the mind something one has perceived before" (53).

[58] Douglas Hedley suggests a tripartite division between imagination, fancy, and fantasy. Of the three, he places fantasy closest to delusion and escapism**.** See *Living Forms of the Imagination*, 52.

[59] Here I will note without upholding Strawson's wish to keep the terminology of mental activity separate from that of mental action ("Mental Ballistics," 228-229).

As Wayne Proudfoot indicates, there is inconsistency in Schleiermacher's treatment of intuition as both independent and interpretive, that is, as *conceptually* apprehended ("Intuition and Fantasy in 'On Religion,'" 91-92; 98). Without being able to point to the exact nature of the interrelation of the imaginary, ideational, and active aspects of fantasy, we may nevertheless affirm that fantasy involves the manipulation of sense perception. It concerns the sense of sight, in particular, and includes the activity of the intellect in the willful, innovative, and unifying transformation of images. Combining the insights of Schleiermacher and Kant, we might posit that there is some degree to which the mind directs fantasy, and some degree to which fantasy directs the mind. This is the interstitial quality that may mirror the relationship between players and avatars in online games. People may for a time control the images of themselves online only to find that they are overpowered by them, their own creations, later on. One contemporary player attests to this tension in virtual agency, writing that his *Second Life* avatar was "a machine I drove, but which also drove me" (Meadows, 124).

Schleiermacher builds upon his views in the second speech of *On Religion* when he states that fantasy creates your world for you. Given that religion is the subject matter of his speeches, it should come as no surprise that Schleiermacher is concerned with the relationship between fantasy and proper religiousness, the essence of which lies in the intuition of the universe. Thus, Schleiermacher boldly claims that "you can have no God without the world" and that it is the direction of your fantasy—the "highest and most original element" in a person—which determines your world (53). Besides the high estimation afforded to *Phantasie*, what is instructive for us is the world-creating capacity of fantasy. *World of Warcraft* is a *world* after all.[60] The implications of this function remain to be seen, however it is worth wondering if the creation of a world that fantasy brings

---

[60] Albert Blackwell situates this "romantic exaltation" of *Phantasie* within the context of Schleiermacher's biography. See *Schleiermacher's Philosophy of Life: Determinism, Freedom, and Phantasy*, pp. 213-214. On the connection between fantasy and the divine creation of the world, see Harvey Cox, *Feast of Fools*, p. 59.

about is deeply personal, driving one inward, or if there is an externality to world-creation that enables social relations and that ultimately connects one to the wider realm of the real. Does a player of *World of Warcraft* have more or less of a world than someone whose play occurs offline or whose play, wherever it is based, is not centered in fantasy? In brief, how external is the world that connects you (for Schleiermacher) to the divine, or (for us) to the normal sphere of action?

Going further, Schleiermacher aligns freedom with fantasy and interiority in the *Monologen*, his partially autobiographical treatise on the *Bildung* (cultivation) of the self. In a particularly powerful passage from the second section of the text entitled *Prüfungen* ("Soundings" or "Probings"), he states that fantasy gives proof of human freedom because it is through fantasy that an individual can envisage and choose a multitude of actions. Blackwell translates this passage as follows, referring to the faculty of *Phantasie* as "imagination":

> Whenever I now act in keeping with my own spirit and disposition, my imagination gives me the clearest proof that I do so by free, individual choice, in suggesting to me a thousand other ways of acting in a different spirit, yet all also consistent with the universal laws of humanity. I project myself into a thousand different likenesses in order to behold my own more clearly. (33)

The freedom of fantasy is quite simply the freedom of choice. This is not a merely individualistic or isolating liberty, though. Whereas fantasy was presented in *On Human Freedom* according to the unique particularity of desire, it is marked here by a commonality. A person who is both unique and radically free in her individuality comes to behold—and Schleiermacher is thoroughly visual in his metaphors—the whole of humanity in herself. The harmonies between self and other, unity and difference, and the individual and the whole that Schleiermacher espouses parallel the paradoxical congruity of inwardness and externality, on the one hand, and freedom and necessity, on the other. And while it is possible to bring these seemingly opposite facets together, such union must be achieved through one side of the dichotomy: that of inward freedom. That is, Schleiermacher maintains that a person whose identity is based on

external reality has not truly cultivated her self. To connect this with the above claim from *On Religion*, we may posit that this person exemplifies a (negative) paradox: although she founds her sense of self on the external, she is world-less. Such an "individual" is encumbered and divided. By contrast, a person who intentionally nourishes her (internal) uniqueness unexpectedly unites with the (external) whole. In developing her inner self and grounding her life on the free activity of her own mind, she merges with what is outside of herself. This position reinforces the importance of fantasy as a powerful mental faculty capable of yielding benefits for society as a whole and for the individual self that fantasizes.

Schleiermacher amplifies his claims about the freedom of fantasy in the characterization of self-development, which he offers in *Aussicht* ("Prospect"), the fourth section of the *Monologen*. There he insists that the well-developed person armed with a powerful will is immune to the terror of fate and outward circumstance; having chosen her identity, she is radically free in that she is able to cultivate her self regardless of external reality. She can present to her mind what is absent from her surroundings. Because "imagination supplies what reality withholds," she transcends the narrow *confines of actuality* (82). Having inner peace, an individual can say that "the development of the spirit is not confined within *the narrow limits of the external*" (83, emphasis mine). The inner play of the mind is freeing in that it releases an individual from the dictates of outer circumstance. Fantasy appears as the antidote to fact. Leaving behind the real world is not cast in a negative light in the *Monologen*; instead, fantasy is portrayed as a crucial component in the building up of the self.[61]

From this brief foray into Schleiermacher's writings, which has allowed us to identify several of the chief elements and effects of fantasy—including freedom of association and freedom of expansion, world creation, unity, and individuality—it is

---

[61] On Sockness's criticism of the compensatory role of fantasy in Schleiermacher's *Monologen*, see "Schleiermacher and the Ethics of Authenticity," p. 505.

worth entering into a consideration of *World of Warcraft*. In what follows, I will describe

basic features of this postmodern play form and seek to make clear how it encompasses

mental acts of fantasy.

II. DEFINING MMORPGS

Regardless of their disciplinary backgrounds, humanities scholars have a reason

to take interest in Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs) if

only because MMORPGs are cousins to the impending Massive Open Online Courses

(MOOCs). Rather than providing strictly educational content, though, MMORPGs afford

adolescents and adults social experiences of fantasy in a particularly networked and

globalized fashion. At any time of day in almost any part of the world, people may go

online and find worlds of fantasy awaiting them.[62]

These games are immersive environments that are powerful in their ability to

attract and addict. While the gamer profile has stereotypically been (perhaps somewhat

troubled or alienated) young white males, the demographics are changing as the

industry expands. Even if they escape notice, women and older adults, retirees and

"homemakers," increasingly figure among the play participants.[63] The wide range of the

appeal of this form of play is due in part to the style in which the worlds are

represented. MMORPGs are routinely if not categorically designed with graphics that

captivate the senses.[64] By activating one's imagination, they can absorb one's attention

---

[62] "Persistent worlds" are defined as those that exist independently of the players; that is, they are maintained even when a player stops playing. This trait lends them an aura of objectivity, if not reality.

[63] See, for example, Jesper Juul's recent study *Casual Revolution* (2010).

[64] In her comparative discussion of narrative and ludic pleasures, Marie-Laure Ryan addresses the five dimensions of *mental*—as opposed to corporeal—immersion: "A complete fusion of game and story should be able to combine both types of experience. Such a combination would fuse a ludic, partly corporeal immersion in the fictional world, which is an intense absorption in a specific task, comparable to the concentration of a violinist performing a concerto, with a more

and consume one's time: an oft-cited 2006 study reports that it is not uncommon for people who undertake these pastimes to spend twenty or more hours per week on them—the equivalent of a part-time job—with super gamers logging on extreme amounts of time (Yee, 316).

In what follows, I will introduce each of the defining MMORPG characteristics— that they are (1) massive, (2) multi-player, (3) online, (4) role-playing, (5) games—in turn. The mimetic feature of this class of play bears particular significance as role-playing is what gives rise both to the formation of avatars and to the occurrence of fantasy.

MMORPGs are distinguished from single-player computer games in that they involve large numbers of players who react to each other and affect each other's play experiences. In a single-player online role-playing game such as *Final Fantasy*, one goes at the play alone, encountering only "non-player" or computer-generated characters in the course of action.[65] In multi-player games, by contrast, as many as 2,000 users may play together at once in one of many parallel worlds, all the while communicating with each other through typing and speech (Yee, 310-311). For this reason, action in this sphere is always interaction. The multiplicity of MMORPGs has important implications for the meaning of players' in-game choices, the players' sense of community, and the collective responsibility they may feel for what they—or their avatars—do online. Note, too, that MMORPGs are defined not simply as multiplayer games but as massively

---

properly narrative and more purely mental immersion, which is an engagement of the imagination in the construction and contemplation of a concrete story world populated by intelligent creatures. … This second kind of immersion can take at least … five forms—spatial, epistemic, temporal, emotional, and social—which present variable degrees of compatibility with the physically active stance of the first type" (170). Notice the way that Ryan's association of the imagination with mental states (with regard to the role of the imagination in *constructing and contemplating* a story world) accords with Schleiermacher's characterization of the work of fantasy as a mental activity. It seems that engaging narrative involves the mind in passive and active, receptive and spontaneous, ways. Further, the dimensions of mental immersion are not altogether separate from the physical acts that make gameplay corporeally captivating.

[65] Tetris is an example of a *non*-role-playing *single*-player online game.

multiplayer games. Being set online, they are liable to be significantly larger in scale than the in-person multiplayer role-playing games from which they originated. In place of physical playing space, the capacity of computer servers becomes their limiting factor.

The role-playing and game qualities of MMORPGs are equally important to review. Professionally and often artfully designed, graphically sophisticated, accompanied by sound, narrative in nature, and evolving in real time, these virtual worlds are the electronic descendants of one fantasy role-playing game in particular, *Dungeons & Dragons*. Created in the 1970s by Dave Arneson and E. Gary Gygax, *Dungeons & Dragons* emerged from the practice of strategic war games that sought to simulate historical battles. The element of high fantasy countered whatever degree of realism was lent to the game by the players' interest in those historical feats. J.R.R. Tolkein's *The Lord of the Rings*, widely acclaimed as the greatest work in fantasy literature, influenced *Dungeons & Dragons* to a sizeable extent, without inspiring the macabre features of the new play genre.

Performativity is a notable difference between the pastimes of reading and role-playing (and between movie watching and playing online), however. A reader who is able to enact a story in her mind by visualizing orcs and other fantastic creatures, by imaginatively representing fanciful things to herself, stands apart from a participant in a role-playing game such as *Dungeons & Dragons* who envisions herself in a role as part of a story that she helps to create alongside other player-characters (Salen and Zimmerman, 406; cf. Mackay, 7). Practically speaking, *Dungeons & Dragons* gamers enter these states of alternate selfhood verbally—and collectively (hence the title of Gary Alan Fine's study, Shared *Fantasy*). Players experience the action individually, in their minds, and together, in their story-crafting. When people gather to play *Dungeons & Dragons*, they neither read from predetermined scripts nor depict scenarios as actors. Instead, in a nearly improvisatory manner, they describe—but do not physically enact—the movements and decisions of their characters, whose traits are randomly established

through rolls of dice (Fine, 7; Waskul, 336).[66] Embodied actions as well as disembodied

thoughts give way to speech acts, as players inhabit their fantasy roles in words.[67]

Both fantasy stories and fantasy games may fit within the Kierkegaardian

category of aesthetic over-reflection as I am employing it. Nevertheless, the distinction

between the amusements' means of pretense raises questions regarding the selfhood of

players and readers. A reader no less than a gamer may escape into an imagined world

and reenter the real world changed, for better or worse. By temporarily and vicariously

inhabiting a fictional setting, she may have cause to reflect on who she is in reality.

Furthermore, a sole reader may "identify with" a character in a story—and this may

occur apart from the opportunity to portray the character's role in deeds or speech

among other readers and without having the ability to direct the character's actions.

Through the sheer imagination of the mind, a reader may come to relate strongly to a

figure in a story and find herself invested in that character's development.

Does a role-playing game, precisely as an *activity* that is *shared*, have the capacity

to involve the self in a more potent way than literary play that is passively and

individually consumed? Against the view that being alone causes the individual reader

to cultivate the faculty of fantasy to a greater extent (because she cannot rely on other

people's creativity to amplify details in the story, for example) is the position that the

presence of other people enhances the pretense of play. In co-play, more creative

possibilities are possible; through the interactions of multiple minds, the combination of

spontaneous associations increases.[68] Additionally, having fellow players who frown

---

[66] The improvisatory sense of fantasy accords with *fantasia* as a musical genre (Randel, 306-308).

[67] In the 1990s, the work of the psychologist, scholar of virtual culture, and MIT professor Sherry Turkle focused on Multi-User Dungeons (MUDs), an intermediate form of play between "traditional" role-playing games like *Dungeons & Dragons* and MMORPGs. See *Life on the Screen*, pp. 180-209.

[68] Notably, the freedom found in the collective enlargement of the sphere of fantasy is compatible with limitation: The presence of other players gives rise to greater innovation but also circumscribes the choices one can enact. In interacting with you, I have more and less liberty.

upon the intrusion of too much realism can help to maintain the aura of fantasy. Perhaps the collective nature of play, then, coupled with the player's power to represent and control the *action* of her character, leads to the transformation of a person's real-world self in a more effective way. Is building a character character building?[69]

The phenomenon of MMORPGs brings together role-playing and fantasy, on the one hand, and role-playing and avatars, on the other. What ties the first pair together chiefly is the unrealistic quality of the worlds in which the play is imaginatively set. Quite simply and generally, when people play MMORPGs, they are not taking up the roles of recognizable or realistic figures like bankers and teachers but are pretending to be fanciful, hybrid, or otherworldly creatures like gnomes and wizards. The second connection, which I specified, places the notion of "avatar" at the center of the online role-playing genre. To clarify this relation, it is worth briefly tracing the trajectory of the adoption of roles in in-person fantasy games to the representation of online characters, or avatars, in MMORPGs.

The authors of the modern classic in game design *Rules of Play*, Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman find three levels of identity operative in contemporary games of simulation (454). In separating the person from the player from the character, they follow Gary Alan Fine, the author of a sociological account of older (analog) fantasy role-playing games. Distinguishing between these levels of meaning, Fine writes that *people* participate in role-playing games, as any other activity, under a primary framework of reality. *Qua players*, however, they participate in gaming according to the game's conventions. Whereas, on the level of the primary framework, physical capacity is what constrains action, on the second plane of the players, the set of game rules determines what is and is not possible. Players restrict themselves to a smaller field of

---

[69] It will be important in the remainder of the chapter to keep separate the question of how playing avatars changes a person from the question of whether playing avatars *should* affect an individual's constitution or arrangement of self.

action than what they are able to accomplish because they respect the arbitrary rules of the game that make the play, play. The constriction of permissibility contrasts with the expanded sense of what is possible under the dictates of fantasy. A player may have to refrain from speaking at certain times or prevent himself from using vocabulary that does not accord with the fantasy setting. Within these limits, though, he is free to "make" his character do unbelievable feats like overcome magical enemies and slay dragons. And, despite the existence of lengthy rulebooks that delineate game protocols with great specificity, players acknowledge a strong undercurrent of freedom, which is captured in the statement "there are no rules that require us to obey the rules" (Carse, §9; quoted in Waskul, 340).

If the first level, the primary framework, is the outermost layer encompassing the play experience—the shell—one finds the heart of play in the third level. Located there is the character. The parts that are being played are what give life to the game, but the players animate the roles. In other words, the game does not exist without the roles, but the roles do not exist apart from the human players. Fine explains the conflation of identities as follows: "[T]his gaming world is keyed in that the players not only manipulate the characters; they *are* characters." At the same time, he affirms the opposite relation.

> The *character* identity is separate from the *player* identity. In this, fantasy gaming is distinct from other games. It makes no sense in chess to speak of "black" as being distinct from Karpov the player … The pieces in chess ("black") have no more or less knowledge than their animator. However, Sir Ralph the Rash, the doughty knight, lacks some information that his player has (for example, about characteristics of other characters, and spheres of game knowledge outside his ken such as clerical miracles) … Likewise, the character must *know* only that information which is available within the game frame and not what the player or the person knows. The character is supposed to operate under the constraints of a closed awareness context with regard to his animator, although this of course is a pretense. Because player, person, and character share a brain, this separation of knowledge on occasion is ignored. (186-187, original emphasis)

Appealing to the category of knowledge, Fine maintains here that a character is not like a game piece. There is no slippage in subjectivity, as it were, between the chess piece and

the player who moves because the game piece is an object. A crack in identity does seem to exist between the player and the fantasy character, though, insofar as the fantasy character—through pretense—is meant to have knowledge and act out of certain tracts of information. In sum, Fine sees the *character roles* that a player undertakes in offline fantasy gaming as differing from and yet inextricably linked to real identity. It is one figure, after all, who is the person, player, and character. The person who enters into the game never fully leaves the real world (the "primary framework"), however much she suspends her sense of ordinary reality in the course of acting (or speaking) out fantasies. Physical limitations are good markers of this tie. If, for instance, the person playing the character mentioned above Sir Ralph the Rash has a cold, then the character's voice will not sound anything other than raspy. And yet it is possible to distinguish what takes place between characters within the game frame and what transpires, socially for example, between the people—their animators—while they play. This is evinced in the expectation that people will not be held accountable outside of the game for comments made "in-character" within the span of the fantasy.

To what extent do these insights from offline role-playing games carry over into MMORPGs? Do the same types of relationship roughly hold between analog characters (rarely, if ever, referred to as "avatars") and digital avatars (that are also sometimes called "characters" and even "protagonists")?[70] In general, what makes an avatar in an MMORPG, an avatar?

Rather than thinking of avatars as virtual entities that have knowledge independent of their animators in the way that Fine regards offline role-playing game characters, I see the online avatar identity as splitting apart from the person-player identity through the element of visualization. Under this interpretation, avatars are

---

[70] In *The Art of Failure* (2013), Jesper Juul uses "protagonist" in his descriptions of certain videogame characters. To my mind, this choice of terminology underscores the narrative element of videogames.

conceived as coming to have the semblance of autonomous agency through their appearance. In their onscreen portrayal they bear marks of strength and powers that certainly do not—cannot—belong to the human beings playing them. These powers approximate supernatural abilities and relate to the sheen of divinity surrounding avatar characters.

Popularized by the 2009 James Cameron movie of the same title, the word "avatar" had already entered the gaming parlance in 1985 through the computer game *Ultima IV: Quest of the Avatar*. It began to take hold more strongly in 1986 when F. Randall Farmer and Chip Morningstar, the creators of the networked game *Lucasfilm Habitat,* used it to refer to one's online persona. In choosing the word, Morningstar likened the player to a deity. As Farmer recounted to the wordsmith journalist Aaron Britt, "'back then, pre-Internet, you had to call a number with your telephone and then set it back into the cradle. You were reaching out into this game quite literally through a silver strand. The avatar was the incarnation of a deity, the player, in the online world. We liked the idea of the puppet master controlling his puppet, but instead of using strings, he was using a telephone line'" (Britt, "Avatar"). The incarnational sense of the word "avatar" comes from its Sanskrit meaning. In Hindu myth, *avatra* refers to a god's descent and earthly manifestation, particularly that of Vishnu (OED; Britt, "Avatar"). Taking on the identity of a virtual avatar is, by contrast, de-carnational. Adopting an avatar is how players virtualize themselves. If taking on flesh is how a deity can appear on earth, being en-avatared is how a person shows up online, *sans* material body.[71]

---

[71] "The computer game enforces on players a mechanization of the body in which their movements and their self-image as alter-ego provide both a physical and a simulated picture of the fragmented, allegorized and reified self under the conditions of capital" (Stallabrass, 87). We might build on Stallabrass's assertion by noting that representing oneself in de-materialized form can involve the mechanization of the (real-life) body in another sense: the repeated physical motions that one performs in gaming may recondition the self by improving dexterity or causing repetitive stress injuries.

Avatars are essential components for how people participate in MMORPGs, then, because they are the means by which people appear to other players.[72] Over and above this significance is the power that avatars hold as a symbol of freedom. Building an avatar is how an individual chooses her online identity. It is what allows her to escape from her everyday persona and its incumbent roles and responsibilities—she sets her self aside—while also making superpowers available to her—she enhances her self. Nonhuman attributes like flying or becoming invincible bring about a world of possibilities. As we will see in the description of *World of Warcraft*, the player does not even have to wait until the game is over in order to re-invent her character. She can re-create her digital *alter ego* during the game, *in medium ludum*, electing abilities anew and tweaking her image according to her desired game-playing experience.

To bring this section to a conclusion, we may turn to the fifth quality and ask in what sense Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games count as games. I propose that MMORPGs exhibit a gamelikeness primarily on the basis of their inclusion of rules. What is the nature of rules in MMORPGs given that they are electronic games? How do the roles that players take up relate to the rules by which they abide? And how do rules relate to reality? Is fantasy reality by other rules?[73] Are there ways to resist constraints in digitally-mediated play, and what are the implications of cheating? Is it not play itself that offers experiences of freedom but the breaking of the rules of the game?

As in Schleiermacher's treatment of fantasy, here too we may note a perhaps surprising correspondence between being rule-bound and being free. Regulations give fantasies a wide—but not total—space in which to unfold. And so one finds that the

---

[72] This is the case for "third-person games," in which a character is seen on the screen, as opposed to first-person games, in which a player looks out on to the gamescape directly.

[73] As Herald writes in *Fluent in Fantasy: The Next Generation*, "Like science fiction and horror, fantasy is speculative—it hypothesizes about realities with other characteristics and rules" (xi).

spheres of MMORPGs are regulated worlds; they are structured by prohibitions and principles, which are imposed by the game designers, as well as by the expectations that arise from one's fellow players. Garry Young and Monica Whitty eloquently express this point when they state, "The fundamental essence of play is the freedom and license to be creative, and to be set apart from ordinary life. Yet play also depends on rules and other factors contingently related to a given space and time. Consequently, an interesting paradox arises in which freedom within play is created only through constraint" ("Games Without Frontiers," 1231). Note the location of this freedom. Freedom is brought about *within the game world* by forbidding certain types of actions. It should not be taken for granted that such freedom extends to the world outside of the game.

On the one hand, many videogames distinguish themselves from older forms of play like board games by demanding regulatory exploration on the part of the players rather than announcing the "dos and don'ts" from the outset of play. The challenge, and a good portion of the pleasure of gameplay in the postmodern era, comes from figuring out the rules and even the objectives of the game as it unfolds. On the other hand, the rules of MMORPGs could not be clearer in that they are programmed: it is the coding that sets the parameters of play, and players are relatively helpless in establishing their own structures for the game. For example, gamers *respond* to the choices for quests that the game designers make available to them (Grey, 43; 165-166). Gamers may or may not accomplish their goals, but the endpoints themselves are out of their power—and quitting appears to be the most effective form of resistance (McKenzie, 25-26; cf. Young and Whitty, 1231). Curiously, it is precisely in the mixture of pre-determination and self-determination that fantasy games approximate reality.

The videogame researcher Jesper Juul similarly argues that games inhabit a paradoxical territory between the reality of rules and the make-believe of fictional worlds. Like the process of fantasizing, games are not rule-based to the exclusion of fiction or fictional to the exclusion of rules. On the contrary, games involve *both* reality

and make-believe in the forms of their structure and imaginary representations (*Half-Real*, 12). That is, rules and physical implements like keyboards—together, players' umbilical cord to the real world—combine with imaginary worlds in which possibility reigns.

What brings playful or fantastic possibility about is action grounded in reality. This dual signification—of what holds for the person playing and what holds for the avatar being played—forms a meta-rule of play, which is to say that games depend on the interstitiality of symbolism. Juul writes: "If we play a board game such as *Axis & Allies* (Nova Game Design 1984), all our actions have a double meaning. We move a piece around a board, but this *also* means we are invading Scandinavia with our troops. In *Tomb Raider* (Core Design Ltd. 1996), we click the keys on the keyboard, but we are also moving Lara Croft" (*Half-Real*, 141, original emphasis). This notion of double meaning, which may bring to mind Bateson's idea of the metacommunication that occurs in play, underlines but also advances the paradoxical nature of games that Juul points out in the beginning of his project. It is not only that the interaction of *simple* rules results in *complex* (and therefore satisfying) gameplay. It is also, I believe, that however simple we may take play to be as a phenomenon—even children do it!—play proves to be undergirded by complex intuitions, intuitions that children—and animals—may share. Not unlike Bateson's nipping dogs,[74] players show that they tacitly recognize the "thirdness" of the game sphere when they treat their actions as both mattering and not mattering. People pounding away on keys to make characters shoot in time or jump to a certain level or swerve their car in the right way know that their movements are simultaneously without much meaning (in the real world) and of potentially deep

---

[74] "This message ['this is play'] contains those elements which necessarily generate a paradox of the Russellian or Epimenides type—a negative statement containing an implicit negative metastatement. Expanded, the statement 'This is play' looks something like this: 'These actions in which we now engage do not denote what those actions *for which they stand* would denote.' … The playful nip denotes the bite, but it does not denote what would be denoted by the bite" (Bateson, 179-180).

consequence (to the game). *Nevertheless, their play proceeds without having to make this explicit.*

Keeping in mind Juul's theory of the half-real, half-fictional quality of game rules, we may turn to another scholar's analysis to see what allows for the representation of deeds in another realm. If the avatar is what mediates the person's online presence, what is the middle factor connecting the outside to the networked world? The way in is no longer, as in Morningstar and Farmville's early experience, the phone line. In her article "From Playfields to Fictional Worlds," Marie-Laure Ryan analyzes the *symbolic* transference between worlds in terms of computer coding. She writes:

> Thanks to the procedural (in other words, code-driven) nature of the computer, strategic game-space could be mapped onto a mimetic narrative space that represents a world. Within the real world, the player hits keys, types text, or manipulates controls; within the fictional worlds, these gestures *count as* moving through a landscape, climbing walls, shooting enemies, picking up objects, or driving a vehicle—all actions that can be put in the service of the kind of goals that people may want to pursue, if not in real life, at least in their fantasies: escaping from jail, rescuing princesses, establishing civilizations, or saving the earth from invading space aliens. Code mediates between these two levels by *interpreting* the player's real world actions as fictional actions, by computing their effects on the game world—a world represented for the computer by numerical values—and by projecting on the screen an image of both the actions and their effects. (166, emphasis mine)

In some sense, namely, in their reliance on the game designers and coders, players are starkly limited in how they can affect the game world. Before a person's actions are played out on the screen as the avatar's movements, they are processed numerically. Thus, insofar as actions are read through the texts of the game code, interpretation becomes computation. The projection of one's idealized or altered self occurs only through the computer-mediated projection of images. Fantasy is represented outside of the mind, on the screen. Zeros and ones reign.

Thus far, I have been stressing the way that rules provide a framework in which the mind may roam free. Rather than being upheld as the condition for the possibility of free play, though, rules may be seen as the stifling of liberty and independent will. How

does a gamer respond affectively or practically when the action he wants his onscreen image to make is forbidden by the game? How can a player escape the rules when the rules are locked in computer code? And is this breaking of the rules a breaking free? In short, what does it mean to cheat at fantasy? Is it possible or, more strongly, necessary to escape from one's escape?

Rules are enforceable to various degrees depending on the nature of the game to which they belong. Whereas the regulations governing players' actions in a game like baseball are subjectively enforced by umpires, rules are executed in a somewhat more objective fashion in computer games because they are coded. The rightfulness of game actions is uniformly, rigidly upheld to the extent that the programming allows. Human beings have the capacity to discern when to enforce and when to suspend rules, but machines must follow their programming across all similar circumstances. This seems noteworthy in speaking to what is a potentially essential feature of humanity. By virtue of being human, we have the frailty but also the freedom of flexibility. Knowing when it is appropriate (or simply advantageous) for particular rules to supervene on other rules, we can adjust our decisions. Our peculiar desires can come into play as we interpret or ignore the rules. One may observe the inclination to bend the rules in traditional, non-computer-generated games. To take a simple example, someone playing the card game solitaire by hand may make recourse to reshuffling the deck, whereas an online player of the same game may not. This does not mean that cheating is impossible in the virtual form, but that its mechanism changes. Gary Alan Fine writes about the almost normative nature of cheating in older role-playing games such as *Dungeons & Dragons*. It was a routine—and social—feature of play to reroll dice or ignore their numbers, allowing players to adopt more desirable qualities for their characters or undertake more favorable actions. When a player of an MMORPG wants to evade the rules, however,

she must do so while remaining within the domain of the programming. This requires

knowledge of the code itself.[75]

Because game coding is unambiguous, it is not subject to interpretation the way

conventional rules are, but only to exploitation. Familiarity with the game's

programming is advantageous, then; it offers a key not only to winning but also to

unlocking additional layers of possibility within the virtual world. As Alex Galloway of

the NYU Game Center writes, "To play the game means to play the code of the game. To

win means to know the system" (*Gaming*, 90-91, quoted in Franklin, 165). However strict

a baseball umpire or *Dungeons & Dragons* gamemaster is, a computer is more exacting.

"Video games don't attempt to hide informatic control; they flaunt it" (ibid.). Thus it is

by going into the code that a player can get out from under its control.

If winning is knowing the game system in its programmed form, cheating is

making weaknesses in the code work to your advantage. It is finding "alongside rules

and structure," play that "*runs free* amongst the rigid protocols of the game engine"

(Franklin, 170, emphasis mine). A hole in the computer code becomes open space for

unexpectedly free movement. Seb Franklin's analysis of the exploitation of weak spots in

game codes—in experimental, innovative, and counterintuitive play practices like

speedrunning—takes a Derridean turn when he writes of the possibility of playing

games against themselves. Speedrunning is a way of racing through a game. Playing a

---

[75] Franklin, responding to comments made on the gaming site 1up.com regarding the practice of speedrunning, differentiates between the enforcement of rules by human beings and by machines: "What Benjamin Turner fails to highlight in comparing game playing to athletics is the distinction in terms of rules. The reason athletes do not cut across the grass is that the rules, as upheld by a human agent with powers of interpretation, forbid it, and to do so would result in disqualification. In games, as the paradigmatic medium of the control society, the rules are limited only by code. If something is possible, within the coded parameters of the game, then the game will allow you to do it, regardless of how it relates to the intended gameplay" (171-172). Ludic actions mean different things according to the nature of the sphere in which they are performed. There is something about human presence and sociability that discourages certain behaviors—during track races, for example. In computer games, however, frivolous actions— actions that do not advance the project of winning—may occur apart from the intention of the game designers. If a player wants to stretch the possibility of play for the sheer joy of it, or keep the play experience going even after a victory, she can. This gives us a picture of what we might think of as pure cheating (rather than instrumental, winning-directed cheating).

game as quickly as possible is not a practice for a casual player but for a hardcore gamer, who has the requisite expertise and interest to engage the game at its limits of possibility. Franklin thus states: "This machinic nature of code is demonstrated most clearly when we try to explore the possibilities within a game. While it is possible to ignore the obvious rules that govern the progression through the game, to instead try and find ways *to play it against itself*, this can only be possible through an extension of its coded logic" (165, emphasis mine). What Franklin describes here is perhaps the ludic analogue to immanent criticism. It is an ability to play, which bespeaks a deep and hard won familiarity with the game's inner workings. Accordingly, the solidity of the logic remains. Players who seek to escape the constraints of the code do so by extending, *not breaking*, what is internal to the code (cf. Salen and Zimmerman, chapter 21).

To recapitulate, MMORPGs are collective experiences of fantasy that are entered into online by adopting avatars. Shared among sizeable groups of people, they revolve around the activity of creative role-playing. Rules, which are difficult but not impossible to break, apply to these roles and determine the range of possible in-game behavior. The extent varies to which gamers do—or want to—apply *moral* rules, which belong to the outer sphere of real life, to the deeds of their contrived characters (Brey, quoted in Young and Whitty, 1231).

III. AVATARS AND AGENCY IN *WORLD OF WARCRAFT*

Two of the most well known MMORPGs are *EverQuest* (released in 1999), which may be accessed online for free, and *World of Warcraft* (released in 2004), which requires a monthly subscription payment of about $15. In what follows, I will focus on *World of Warcraft* (*WoW*). Owned by the company Blizzard Entertainment and designed by Rob Pardo, Jeffrey Kaplan, and Tom Chilton (Bartle, 36), *WoW* stands as an impressive Web presence and one of most popular MMORPGs in the Western world, if not the most

popular one (Juul, *A Casual Revolution*, 59). A few years ago at its height, *WoW* boasted a subscription base of at least twelve million people (Hill, "MMO Subscriber Populations"). Admittedly, it is unclear what the division was within that figure between paid subscribers, individuals with multiple accounts, and those who logged on under a free trial period. Nevertheless, the potential for substantial revenue is evident. Videogames do not rival Hollywood earnings; they surpass them. It is not only the movie industry that has taken notice of this entertainment trend. *The New York Times* now has regular videogame reviews for, one would conjecture, more than aesthetic reasons.[76] Videogames have even found their way into the collection of the Museum of Modern Art. The MoMA's 2013-2014 installation "Applied Design" puts fourteen videogames on display ("Exhibitions: Applied Design," http://www.moma.org/visit/calendar/exhibitions/1353, accessed 03/27/2013).

These facts and financial interests aside, what is the game of *WoW* and how does one play it? According to the statement provided on its website, "*World of Warcraft* is an online game where players from around the world assume the roles of heroic fantasy characters and explore a virtual world full of mystery, magic, and endless adventure" (*WoW*, Screen: "What is *World of Warcraft*," http://us.battle.net/wow/en/game/guide, accessed 08/23/2012).[77] This official sketch of the game makes explicit use of the language of fantasy in describing the roles that people will enact in the course of play. Magic aligns closely with the aspect of fantasy: the superhuman powers of the characters are essential to the representation of the made-up game land, Azeroth. Or, as Nana Asfour describes it, the *WoW* game graphics are "almost childishly fantastical" ("A

---

[76] As early as 1993, commentators were addressing the intertwining of entertainment forms: "If part of the pleasure of cinematic spectacle is an identification with the protagonist on the screen, involving an imaginative replay of the action, then computer games seek to make this act palpable. … [T]hese games, while posing as first-order simulations of reality, are in fact second-order simulations of scenarios dreamt up in Hollywood" (Stallabrass, 86).

[77] Technically, there are four modes of play. In two of these, ("Normal" (Player versus Enemies) and "PvP" (or Player versus Player)), role-playing is optional. Screen: "Getting Started," http://us.battle.net/wow/en/game/guide/getting-started, accessed 02/02/2013.

War Zone I Can't Escape"). Through their avatars' magical features, players are able to imagine and inhabit a mysterious, colorfully enchanted world, which differs substantially from our own. The unrealistic traits are central to the gameplay in that they are necessary for navigating the four continents of Azeroth and surviving the dangerous adventures that take place there.

Exploration occurs at multiple levels within *WoW*. Beyond the attempt to carry out adventuresome quests, it takes the shape of the incremental discovery of the game's rules. As in many online games—and this is an even culturally significant departure from a number of traditional forms of play like sports and board games—players come to learn what constitutes proper play in *WoW* by pushing up against its boundaries. A method of trial and error thus replaces the clear pronouncement of which actions will succeed from the outset. Each plane of discovery—of the magical world and of the rules—seems to contribute to the dynamism and enjoyment of the play experience. Gamers report finding the challenge of determining what the right sequence of moves is satisfying. Frustration is not altogether separate from this satisfaction, either: mastering stages almost necessarily entails repeated effort. Recurrent failure is dialectically entwined with the pleasure of victory.

Underlying this MMORPG is a narrative about two groups, called the Alliance and the Horde. Not unexpectedly, the conflict between them is set in legendary terms as the struggle between light and darkness or good and evil. The official introduction to *WoW* continues:

> *World of Warcraft* thrusts you into a central role of an ever-changing story. You and your friends will be active participants in events that are steeped in the rich lore of this fantasy universe. Fight for either the Alliance or the Horde, and experience a fully-realized fantasy world. (ibid.)

Passing over the confused description of the fantasy world as "fully-realized," we may say that this game is, in short, story-driven and conflict-ridden. Only a minimal familiarity with the "pre-history" of the Alliance and the Horde groups is necessary. For

some players, delving into the details of *WoW* mythology contributes to the release that the game world offers. It is possible to get caught up in the "rich lore" of the game. To a general extent, though, characters' actions play out against a generic background of warring factions. The way that the present conflict between players gives shape to the story is what matters.

Overlaying the established structure is narrative flexibility. What course the plot takes through the players' actions is genuinely open; if one team or side had to win or if it were necessary to enact a particular storyline, *WoW* would cease to be a game. (Uncertainty is one of the defining qualities of a game. A player should not know at the outset what the outcome of the game will be.) Furthermore, it may be said that the malleability of the story of *WoW* gives players authorial agency. In addition to being characters in the world of Azeroth, they have the power to be co-authors of its story through their actions, much as participants in *Dungeons & Dragons* could exercise ludic authority in speech.

Avatars

Building an avatar and *adopting* it as a role are essential aspects to playing *WoW*. The process of representing himself online requires the gamer to make decisions, the ethical and psychological implications of which may be unclear to him. Abstracting, we may say that avatars can reveal us to others online even as they hide us from ourselves. At the same time, however, it may be the case that avatars provide the cover necessary to make our "real" identity known to ourselves and others. The ambiguity of play means that a gamer may delve more deeply into selfhood, gaining a better sense of who he is, for having escaped into the imagined sphere of *WoW*. A further incongruity is found in the liability of the balance of power to tip between an avatar and its animator. When this occurs, boundaries break and Frankenstein-like transformations result: what was once

under control and contained in the game world seeps out into the real world in undesirable ways in a counter-escape, as it were. Sometimes we play the roles and sometimes the roles play us. We get played.

The "both/and" nature of MMORPGs asserts itself yet again as these enterprises are seen to be both salutary and harmful. Over and against the danger of deleterious real-world effects are the numerous pleasures that adopting an avatar can offer during the play. An avatar may hold the promise of anonymity—"Once Peter creates his character, that is his only identity in the game" (Turkle, "Constructions and Reconstructions," 212)—as well as the appeal of autonomy—"When someone slips into an avatar, [he] slip[s] into the ability to be competent …" (Meadows, 86). In short, the elements I care to highlight in the following description and analysis of *WoW* avatars are choice, flexibility of identity, and ambiguity of change.

After providing data and dollars by logging on and signing up, a person is ready to craft her online, in-game self. The first choice that a *WoW* gamer has to exercise in creating an avatar is the group to which she will belong. This is significant but not final. On the one hand, being a member of the Alliance opens up some possibilities but forecloses others. There are certain traits and tasks that belong exclusively to the Alliance and, conversely, some that are available only to the Horde. On the other hand, this determination of attributes does not have to feel restrictive because players can have multiple avatars. That is, *a player does not have to commit to any single option* but can experience the game from a range of avatar perspectives. As the game guide states:

> Your character is your avatar in *World of Warcraft*. You're not limited to one character, though; you're free to create dozens of characters if you want to experience all the different race and class combinations. Many players refer to their most frequently played character as their "main" and all other characters as their "alts." Why create more than one character? Since each class plays differently, it's fun to experiment with other styles of gameplay. (*WoW*, "Chapter I: Getting Started," http://us.battle.net/wow/en/game/guide/getting-started, accessed 08/23/2012)

One must select for gender (male or female), race (for which there are eight options, or, in the expanded edition of the game, twelve), and class (for which there are eleven possibilities). Later, after having accumulated points, one exercises choice in how to apply the reward tokens to the increase in avatar talents, that is, in deciding which areas to assign new strengths (O'Dwyer, 3:20).[78] That this process of building an avatar involves customization seems very much in line with contemporary consumer expectations. You are not constrained to play a role that someone else determines for you: it is up to you to select which features and facilities—orc or human, goblin or gnome, warrior or warlock, e.g.—are yours, *unless* you would prefer otherwise. Even the option of opting out of customization is accounted for. "If you're in a hurry, you can use the 'randomize' button to have the game generate a few random configurations until you see one you like …" (*WoW*, "Chapter I: Getting Started"). The *WoW* designers understand that, like work schedules, our leisure time may be harried.

The flexibility of identity in *WoW* is striking. This is not to deny that people may form emotional attachments to their avatars or that they may choose to play one role consistently. Indeed, studies report people's serious investment in characters that are carefully developed. It is even common for someone who plays a single character repeatedly over a long period to express grief when the character meets demise and the role comes to an end. But it is worth pausing and reflecting on the significance of the possible fluidity of identity in this game world. As a player, you do not have to "limit" yourself to one avatar; you may experiment with the many different character possibilities at your disposal. If one avatar ceases to excite or please you, switch to another!

---

[78] There are two types of avatar accessories. In game worlds, there are things that help achieve goals and "maximize what liberty the rules offer. But in social worlds, like *Second Life* and *Gaia*, the primary accessories are decorative, things that help achieve social status and maximize the relationships with other avatars" (Meadows, 63). Even decorative objects have a function. Their purpose is a social one.

Is this facet of *WoW* liberating because we feel relatively locked into our identities in the sphere of the everyday where—because the choices we have made and the circumstances into which we are born commit us to particular ways of life—we cannot shift what we take to be defining aspects of ourselves so easily? Is this element of *WoW* appealing because of the low cost of change? Reinvention of self is possible in the ordinary world, but it is risky. To change in a radical way in real life is to risk real consequences, but consequences in game worlds do not seem all that consequential. If you make a mistake or use poor judgement in shaping one avatar, there is an almost endless stream of "alts" waiting. Additionally, the ready forgiveness of rebirth is available.

In its unreality, the environment of *WoW* may be a pathway to psychological growth, offering a safe space in which a person can reconstruct her identity. A person may give himself qualities by first attributing them to his online self. Advocating for this *non*-escapist view of gaming, Turkle writes in "Constructions and Reconstructions of the Self in Virtual Reality":

> Another popular image, and one that has been supported by some academics writing on role-playing games, turns them into places of escape. Players are seen as leaving their "real" lives and problems behind to lose themselves in the game space. Julee's story [of working through a traumatic family situation through an RPG] belies both stereotypes. For her the game is psychologically constructive rather than destructive, and she uses it not for escape but as a vehicle for engaging in a significant dialogue with important events and relationships in her "real" life. *Role-playing games are able to serve in this evocative capacity precisely because they are not simple escapes from the real to the unreal, but because they stand betwixt and between, both in and not in real life*. (210, emphasis mine)

Turkle here looks to the advantage of the realism contained within fantasy. It is not simply a fact that reality is finally inescapable in play; the connection, which a game retains to the primary sphere of life, proves personally useful because that space of overlap is where the potential of psychological healing lies. If a game character were completely unrelated to the real self of the gamer, a kind of "transference" would be impossible: one could not translate the positive traits learned in the game to one's

everyday self. Interestingly, this psychological claim forms the counterpoint to Juul's analysis in *Half-Real* of the paradoxical way in which games physically operate. Like the telephone cord in the early days of online games, physical devices (whether joysticks, keyboards, or headsets) are the implements by which one *enters* a fantasy world and connects with others. Concrete actions move inward, as it were. Being symbolized, they become available for others to see on the screen. The abstract qualities that Turkle mentions move in the opposite direction. The extent of the parity of fantasy and real-life realms would explain, or allow for, a parity of selves. A gamer's onscreen image could work back on him, shaping his actions. A valiant avatar may a courageous man make.

Of course, such positive engagement of virtually mediated selfhood is not everyone's experience. Individuals are apt to suffer adverse effects from gaming when the world of the game proves to be disappointingly disparate from their regular (embodied) way of life. Pointing to the likelihood that admirable alterations to a gamer's self-concept will not survive the shift in context, Young and Whitty state: "the psychological discrepancy between offline-self and avatar is made salient every time the gamer leaves the gamespace. In other words, the player does not simply experience a *lack* of these qualities, offline; rather, and importantly, they are experienced as something suddenly *lost*, only recoverable in gamespace" (1234, original emphasis). MMORPGs are not training grounds for how to act in real life. They are, at best, temporary releases from ordinary pressures; they neither serve as nor set out to be models for living. *If taken too seriously*, a person's virtual experiences may cause her everyday world to seem bleaker. It is evident that, to the extent that this pattern of disempowerment holds, escaping into spheres of pretense proves existentially unhelpful, even debilitating.

Numerous sources attest to the problematic crossing over of spheres. To take one case reported by ABC News online, a woman was arrested in 2008 for allegedly attempting to kidnap a man who had been her boyfriend in the virtual play space *Second*

Life. In his article, Scott Michels quotes a police offer's explanation that the suspect "'had difficulty distinguishing between the virtual relationship and a real-life relationship.'" As the boundaries between the worlds became increasingly blurred, an extraordinary power of the virtual took hold. Instead of dictating its actions, the player came to be affected by the online character. Meadows describes the transition this way: "As people become more involved in the roles and rules of their avatar, they can also lose control of their alternative personality they have invented for that system. The alternative personality can become predominant and begin to take over the primary, daily one" (82). The source of frustration in particular is the inability to replicate the avatar's actions.

Agency

After establishing what your *WoW* character will look like, who its allies will be, which skill set it will have (e.g., that of a warrior, rogue, or priest), and even what its unique name will be, it is time to begin play—or work.[79] The core of the game is formed by thousands of different quests, which are goal-oriented tasks assigned to the avatars by Non-Player Characters (NPCs). Azeroth, however magical a realm, is a very organized space. The classification of quests exemplifies this orderliness. Quests are divided among these categories: normal, group, dungeon, heroic, raid, player vs. player, and daily (*WoW*, "How to Play," http://us.battle.net/wow/en/game/guide/how-to-

---

[79] In *Gamer Theory*, Ken Wark illuminates the confusion of work and leisure—in each direction—and the inclusion of boredom in both: "No wonder people find their leisure as dull as their work—leisure *is* work. … The free time available for education, culture, sport, even faith was once the hard-won fruit of labor's struggle to liberate time from work. This free time gave rise to heterotopias of sport and art that at least held the intoxicating illusion of autonomy from the necessity of work. Now art and sport become work disguised as games, or is it games disguised as work? The sporting metaphors migrate from leisure to work and back again" (¶156, original emphasis). Having written of the disguised coincidence of work and games, he asserts the inescapable reproduction of boredom. "The very action of overcoming boredom reproduces it" (¶166).

play, accessed 02/02/2013). Some of the quests like finding, collecting, and distributing objects are more tedious and time-consuming than adventurous and fulfilling, which is what gave rise to the disturbing and strange outsourcing of play referred to as "gold farming."[80] What to gamers will be an obvious aspect of play is necessary, for outsiders like myself, to call explicit attention to, namely that competition, violence, and behavior that may be thought of as "dark" mark these in-game activities to various degrees. To wit, one may restore one's (avatar) health by cannibalizing one's victims (Young and Whitty, 1230). *War* is as central to *World of* War*craft* as the notion of an imaginative world.

Among the range of objectives of quests are the search for honor and the search for rewards, or income. Acquisitive desire, then, is in large part what drives the game. As Danny O'Dwyer states in a video that provides an unofficial summary explanation of *WoW*, "the game system of reward encourages you to take on just one more quest" (6:42). A quest leads to a reward, which leads to the improvement of an avatar that can consequently undertake better, more-rewarding quests. The addictive potential of this self-enforcing loop—and the "just one more quest" attitude embedded in it—begins to take clear shape.[81]

Not incidentally, the opportunity to socialize is one of the chief features that draws players repeatedly back to the game. On the one hand, there is the issue of real-life emotional fulfillment. If your meetings with others revolve around the game, by

---

[80] Julian Dibbell gives an account of the phenomenon of Chinese gold farming in the feature article of the 06/17/2007 *New York Times Magazine*.

[81] Analyzing the computer game as a simulacrum of work, Stallabrass writes: "There is a marked liberal individualist ethic behind such games in which the character develops through intrinsically unrewarding labor" (87-88). Stressing that games are a simulacrum of work, and not real work, he further claims: "It is *signs* of labour that are apparent in computer gaming, not real work, for the physical strain of heavy, repetitive tasks is replaced by the digital twitching demanded by the control system. Because of the media's intrinsic paucity, emotional attachment to the game is established through labour, emerging out of the Sisyphean nature of the player's task. The arcade, evoking gambling and sex, is actually a furtive simulacrum of the sweatshop" (96, emphasis mine). Cf. Dylan McKenzie, "Fantasies of Labor."

leaving the game you lose the chance to spend time (even electronically) with those with whom you are close. On the other hand, there is the issue of the competitive advantage of playing with others. *WoW* is structured so as to encourage collaboration, even friendship. In the discussion of the social character of role-playing games in the last section, it was noted that the fantasy experience may be enriched by being shared with others: more can be *imagined* with more people. Here, it appears that more can be *accomplished* with more people. Because of the impossibility of reaching certain levels by playing independently, players must band together in parties (groups of five) and in group raids (consisting of up to twenty-five players). A successful play experience depends on the division of parts, or roles, and the coordination of actions, which calls for leadership, initiative, and even commitment.

Behind the avatars, people in the real world are doing the strategic "work" of identifying, organizing, directing, and carrying out the steps that are necessary for a victorious raid. And whereas parties and raids may casually come and go, guilds are serious alliances in their persistence.[82] Individual players are accountable to one another for the roles they play within the group. More than who they are, they feel responsible for what they do; they do not want to make costly missteps that will aversely affect the guild as a whole. In the emerging body of secondary literature on *WoW*, a great deal is made about the collective side of play. However much the game may isolate a person from real life, it offers experiences of community, and these may be deeply felt. Furthermore, social bonds forged in Azeroth may carry over to America and the other countries in which the game is accessed, having significant personal impact there. People who begin offline as friends may decide to play together online as avatars, but

---

[82] Notably, these groups may be organized by the players themselves—think of real world friends who want to play together and of people who want to partner with each other because they have become friends through the game. Conversely, the groups may be provided automatically for (perhaps lonelier) players through a matching function such as "Dungeon Finder."

the influence can run equally in the other direction: people who meet as avatars online may enter into even transnational relationships as actual persons outside of the game.

The intensity of in-game action for individuals stems from the interrelation between being and doing. It is not simply that a player relates to his avatar, it is that he identifies with his avatar by controlling the avatar's motions within the game. From a peculiar perspective it is possible to say that the avatar depends on the player. Thus, a player may let his fellow players down in making a wrong move, but he may also fail his avatar by letting his attention lapse or be being maladroit on the controls or keyboard. Turkle, in her analysis of videogaming in *Second Self*, writes, "When you play a video game you … have to do more than identify with a character on the screen. You must act for it. *Identification through action* has a special kind of hold. Like playing a sport, it puts people into a highly focused, and highly charged state of mind" (82, emphasis mine).[83] Fantasy worlds may turn into high-pressured environments by demanding that players act proficiently (and, what is more, in concert). Time is of the essence as "[p]layers experience their every movement as instantly translated into game action. The game is relentless in its demand that all other time stop and in its demand that the player take full responsibility for every act, a point that players often sum up by the phrase 'One false move and you're dead" (ibid.). Of course, by concentrating on inconsequential challenges as characters, players are "free" for a time from having to attend to the real life problems they face as persons. As long as their mental energy is consumed in meeting the needs immediate to the game world, their earthly circumstances pleasurably fade from view.

There are a number of other interesting details about *WoW* gameplay but the final point of salience to address here is how the game comes to an end. In what does victory consist? After incrementally refining their skills by completing quests, players

---

[83] Cf. Fine, 56, on the constant sense of characters' endangerment.

may reach the highest, most demanding stages of play. This explains the terminology of "leveling up": play ceases when the final level is mastered. Initially, there were sixty levels to *WoW* but the latest expansion of the game, the fourth, offers a total of ninety (*WoWWiki*, http://www.wowwiki.com/Level, accessed 02/06/2013). According to a *WoW* forum, around 150 hours are required to reach and conquer the ninetieth level (http://eu.battle.net/wow/en/forum/topic/5493111009, accessed 02/07/2013). Comments offered on the discussion board illuminate player expectations of intense involvement in a striking way. One contributor, "Cattlebruisr," refers matter-of-factly to the need to play eight to twelve hours a day to accomplish the feat, whereas another writer, "Gráinne," suggests playing four to five hours a day to finish all ninety levels, adding that "[y]ou can surely do it faster if you're experienced and focused." Such gamers, who are dedicated enough to participate in the online discussion board, are committed to seeing the game through—to completing it—and to doing so efficiently, maybe even wholeheartedly, to the degree that they are willing to sacrifice significant portions of the routines and responsibilities of their everyday, embodied lives.

The enormous number of available avatar combinations is matched it seems by the number of quests that a player may encounter. But is *this* massiveness of Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games, which we might call the massiveness of possibility, welcomed? One user conveys her exasperation over the seemingly endless extent of play, writing:

> Uncle – we give up, Blizzard. There are too many things in this game for a sane player to accomplish on a regular basis! You've driven completionists to utter distraction, forcing us to pick and choose the things we'll list and farm and research and grind. At the same time, because anyone can dabble in any aspect of the game, players have become more accepting of playstyles that differ from their own. While we're all funneled to 90 and its panoply of activities, true, there's no longer "one true endgame" in Azeroth. (Poisso)

The flexibility of player choice over which tasks to undertake, in combination with the commercial impetus for expansion, threatens to make the game unsatisfyingly

amorphous.[84] Why would it be problematic if there were more than one, final way to win? Would discontent arise because a plurality of victories takes away bragging rights? Players who derive pleasure and meaning from completing an ultimate and shared goal (those whom Poisso calls "completionists") are deprived of a sense of an ending. Such players are forced to take an instrumentalist approach to the game. This provides another piece of evidence for the view that attitudes, if not experiences, of play and work merge in games, especially those conducted at extreme levels.[85,86]

The (not infinite, but) ever-extending possibility of play is not only in service to the expansion of the imagination. Additionally, it is a function of the game company's drive toward the concrete goal of greater and greater revenue. At the same time, it mirrors the psychological striving that marks so much of real life, the unending and individual quest to be slightly better—and then better still. In "Just Gaming: Allegory and Economy in Computer Games," Stallabrass couches the significance of stretching out play in these capitalistic and existential terms. "The operation of desire in these games is simply an acute form of the normal procedure of the market in a fashion-driven culture: there is always a sense of something beyond the present experience, of some unused potential within the machine, of a task never quite finished, of a realism not quite complete" (101). Though written in 1993 before the advent of *WoW*, these lines are prescient in understanding why the game resists closure. From the game company's perspective, there is evermore profit to squeeze from the consumer-player; from the

---

[84] Golumbia astutely notes that gamemakers "find a variety of means to extend the player's interaction, no doubt largely because of the danger of a player's finishing the game, which can't be allowed" (195).

[85] I thank Peter Wicks for his observation on the language used to describe leaving MMORPGs. It is telling that players speak of *quitting* a videogame as one quits a job.

[86] On the connection between continuously expanding online game worlds and Ludovico Ariosto's poem, *Orland Furioso*, see Ryan, 170. On the existential threat that final victory represents to the gamemakers as well as to the players, see Wark, *Gamer Theory*. Paradoxically, it is the satisfaction of desire in winning that leaves us at a loss. So is it the playing that is more meaningful than the win, which comes at the expense of more play? Is "play the thing"?

player's perspective, there is evermore—and evermore realistic—discovery to be had.

What is more, in being framed in terms of desire, this passage calls to mind

Schleiermacher's account of fantasy, according to which desire particularizes the chain

of one's mental action. Where Schleiermacher sees the function of fantasy as contained,

however, Stallabrass finds manufactured desires that are insatiable. It is through their

insatiability that such desires are productive of more and more actions, which serve to

keep the game profitably going.[87]

IV. CONCLUSION:

FAILED ESCAPISM, OR OVER-REFLECTION THAT IS NOT REFLECTIVE ENOUGH

In this chapter, I have set out several key features of the specific MMORPG *World*

of Warcraft against the backdrop of Schleiermacher's philosophy of fantasy. While

emphasizing the complicated relationship that holds between avatars and agency, I have

pointed to *World of Warcraft*'s narrative components, its inclusion of magic, competition,

and choice, and its potential to offer experiences that are individually immersive and yet

productive of social ties. In what remains, I would like to suggest that fantasy-centered

MMORPGs are inadequate as a source of freedom *and* escapism. To the extent that they

are exercises in fantasy that beckon one to live in one's mind, MMORPGs are escapist.

And, being escapist in this way, they offer only a negative freedom—that of temporarily

leaving the real world behind. But MMORPGs are only partially escapist. They can

therefore confer some freedom and some benefits on the real self. MMORPGs are not

---

[87] In the continuation of his analysis, Stallabrass points to the problem of the inevitable arbitrariness of game endings: "There is a distinct problem in computer games of providing an adequate ending: nothing can quite fulfil the expectation of such a long task finished, especially because the ending so often appears in an arbitrary fashion, as the result not of some supremely difficult task, but as the chance consequence of just another combination of key-strokes. The ending is at once longed for and known in advance to be a let-down" (101). Presumably, the stronger a game is in its narrative capacity, the more meaning can be attributed to the concluding actions, the less the arbitrary power of key-stroke maneuvers matters.

realms of complete fantasy; reality is never completely left behind. Because of the inclusion of aspects of reality, a degree of continuity is possible between one's game self and one's embodied self. As far as I can tell, it is this point of connection, this cord between reality and make-believe in one's psyche, that accounts for the potential of videogames to affect one's being in the world. Good or bad character traits may be carried across this pathway between the person, player, and avatar. Bringing the capacity of reflection to bear on these experiences of play—going beyond the mere exercising of over-reflection that occurs during them—may contribute to the *realization* of a more mature freedom in life.[88]

Let us take each of our concluding points—on freedom, escapism, realism, and reflection—in turn.

World of Warcraft and games of its ilk fall uncomfortably between fantasy and realism. Nevertheless, it is possible to look at their participation in fantasy and realism in terms of freedom and constraint. On the one hand, MMORPGs provide an expansive sense of freedom by allowing players to represent themselves as avatars in magical worlds. Players find pleasure in defining themselves however they want, recreating themselves when they lose or err, and identifying with their onscreen images, which may depict qualities such as strength and power that they admire (and desire) in real life. Avatars open up the possibility of players *being*, for a time, different from and better than their embodied selves. Avatars are also responsible for bringing about the social freedom of connecting with other players in a way that may be safer or more inviting than in-person interactions. Further, acting as their avatars, players break through the

---

[88] It may be that positive transformation in a person can come about through videogaming apart from reflection. The possibility of such an unconsciously arrived upon achievement, seems limited, though, in its unreliability. While not a guarantee in itself that playing games like *WoW* will be advantageous for one's quest for greater selfhood, engaging with the action of avatars in a thoughtful way is, one imagines, salutary.

constraints of reality and *do* things they ordinarily cannot do. The imaginative quality of these play spheres makes normally impossible feats possible.

On the other hand, the element of fantasy within these games is compromised in the ways that the games incorporate and replicate reality. Scholars including Jesper Juul, Julian Stallabrass, and McKenzie Wark, attest to how videogames and role-playing games remain tethered to the everyday. MMORPGs have "real" rules (as Juul puts it); necessarily rely on physical devices and human maneuvers; replicate social dynamics in the hierarchy that takes hold among players; reproduce instrumental mentalities familiar to us from our work lives; and actively seek to make game worlds more and more sensually recognizable in their graphics and visualization. Even as, in stirring the imagination, MMORPGs allow the mind to be overtaken by possibility, they fail to cultivate desirable traits in the self in a reliable way. In sum, this powerful form of postmodern play may *captivate* the mind without providing it the means to cope with real-life struggles with limitation. To this extent, they are unhelpfully or incompletely escapist.

I want to try to state my view as precisely as possible here by drawing a distinction between games of "release" and games of "training." There is a legitimate space for pastimes that are merely escape-valves from the pressures of normative life. Even as short-lived opportunities to find respite and relief, these experiences have worth and contribute to a good life. What I would object to is the over-valuing of this type of play. Such merely escapist play activities should not be taken as being more than they are. They should not be taken as sites of robust or reliable freedom. Thus, when a person leaves the game world of *WoW* (as she inevitably must) and returns to the predominant sphere of life, it is uncertain whether she will be any freer than when she started playing. This uncertainty is one of the chief factors that push us forward to the next chapter to investigate another way of playing.

In the section on avatars above, I made brief mention of cases in which people's real lives where affected by their characters. There was the example of psychologically constructive play, supplied by Sherry Turkle, and the instance of psychologically destructive play, as reported by ABC. I would like to expand that discussion in a small way now by describing "cybertherapy," an innovative practice that combines analysis with simulations. Under this guise of therapy—as opposed to gaming—avatars are tools for reimagining and retraining the self.[89] Virtual worlds become a safe space in which to overcome traumas and fears. As Benedict Carey reporting for the *Times* writes:

> For more than a decade, a handful of therapists have been using virtual environments to help people work through phobias, like a fear of heights or of public spaces. But now advances in artificial intelligence and computer modeling are allowing them to take on a wider array of complex social challenges and to gain insight into how people are affected by interactions with virtual humans – or by inhabiting avatars of themselves. ("In Cybertherapy, Avatars Assist with Healing")

This exercise may be thought of as the computer-mediated form of the common psychotherapeutic technique of imagining painful or anxiety-producing experiences. In both cases, the mind is engaged for the sake of modifying behavior.

For meaningful improvement of the sort sought in cybertherapy to take hold, reflection is necessary—not the "imaginary constructions of thought" of the noncommittal aesthete (or videogame enthusiast?) that "leads to nothing" (*Either/Or*, II, 163, 289), but the salubrious thinking that Schleiermacher recommends in the *Monologen* when he writes:

> But when the exercise of imagination is not merely mechanical, but accompanied by inner reflection, as it must be wherever there is true life, and when judgment is the conscious issue of such reflection, then the object contemplated, though it be foreign to one's experience and only imagined, shapes the spirit, as much as if possessed by it in reality and dealt with externally. Thus in the future as in the past I shall take possession of the whole world by virtue of inner activity, and I shall make better use of things in quiet contemplation than if I had to respond to every quickly passing impression with an overt act. (82-83)

---

[89] I would like to reiterate that this instrumental *use* of videogaming puts into question its status as play.

Over-reflection may be the right kind of thinking for fantasy—when one engages in pre-tense, one wants the freedom to draw on the wildest possible combination of ideas—but over-reflection is not a practice of freedom within everyday living. The "over-reflection" of a particular type of fantasy that precludes action needs to be countered by another kind of reflection. Reflection may be directed to action in decision.

As seen in the first chapter of this dissertation, the immediacy of the sensuous play of early childhood is developmentally good for a period. Piaget, for one, regards play that is symbolic—like the play of the mind in fantasy—as an advance on the earlier play forms of adolescents. The stage of fanciful reflection represented in this chapter by the MMORPG genre may itself be built upon by the engagement of a more mature form of playful thinking that, grounded in universal norms, leads to real-life actions and commitments. We are therefore poised to enter the dissertation's second section, which is on ethics. In progressing from *World of Warcraft* to Pascal's *Wager*, we will turn from the virtual to virtue, from make-believe to making to believe.

PART II. ETHICAL PLAY

Chapter 3

Rational Decisions for Christian Theism, or How Pascal Redeemed Play

Legend has it that in 1654, the same year as his memorialized "night of fire"—
Dieu d'Abraham, Dieu d'Isaac, Dieu de Jacob …—Blaise Pascal experienced a terrifying but
somewhat common seventeenth-century travel risk: the horses pulling his carriage
began running wild and broke free. Having severed their reins and driven themselves
into the river, they left Pascal and his traveling companions suspended on "the brink of
the precipice" (Grimsley, 76). Not quite two centuries later in the first draft of *The Book
on Adler*, Søren Kierkegaard mentions this story and on its basis includes Pascal in his
consideration of people who, exposed to mortal danger, are "deeply moved by faith"
(68).[90] It strikes me that among other things they share—a Christian spirit, fervor in
religious commitment, fragmentary and lyrical styles of philosophy, difficult relations
with the reigning church powers of their time, and a precursory role to twentieth-
century existentialism—Kierkegaard and Pascal also act somewhat like Pascal's horses
on the day of the "accident at the Neuilly Bridge": in their writings, they run away with
us, leaving us on a brink and confronting us with the reality of existential danger by
leading us to an Either/Or, *Infini – Rien*, all or nothing point of decision. They ask each
reader who is now facing the precipice, What will *you* decide, what will you do, what
will you believe, who will you become? Your life is on the balance: which way will you
tip? As Judge William says in the second volume of Kierkegaard's *Either/Or*, written as a
book-length letter to an aesthetic friend, "I wish only to force you to the point where the

---

[90] Jean Mesnard all but dismisses the story, emphasizing that it was third-hand testimony
anonymously and belatedly relayed (60-61). Showing the life the tale nevertheless took on,
Francis Coleman reports Voltaire's scoffing comment to Condorcet, '*Mon ami, ne vous lassez point
de répéter que, depuis l'accident du Pont de Neuilly, le cerveau de Pascal était dérangé*' (19).

necessity of making a choice manifests itself and thereafter to consider existence under ethical qualifications" (178).

In games as in life we struggle to make wise choices in uncertain circumstances. We employ strategy—assessing risk, calculating probabilities, identifying values, planning for pleasant future outcomes—and then we let our actions emerge from our strategy, wanting our reasoning, desires, and behavior to accord. Gambling is a specific form of play that carries these features. Making wagers and living "under ethical qualifications" have important aspects in common, although seeing this point may require unconventional interpretations of both gambling and morality.[91]

When he answered a request for betting advice from his gambling friend Méré about how to divide stakes in interrupted games, Pascal formalized a decision-making approach that earned him recognition as the father of "decision theory." This contribution is also what makes Pascal an appropriate author to include in my analysis of play through the Kierkegaardian lenses of the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious. Under the iteration of play represented here by Pascal, choice and commitment are paramount. Thus, we move forward from a consideration in the first two dissertation chapters of game forms that are typically associated with children and protracted adolescence to a view of play in which one's way of life is at stake. This is the shift within the Kierkegaardian paradigm from the aesthetic to the ethical.

---

[91] Historical, theological, and literary treatments of the risk-centered play form are offered in Jackson Lear's *Something for Nothing: Luck in America*, Kathryn Tanner's "Grace and Gambling," and Dostoevsky's *The Gambler*. Tanner's essay appears as a chapter in Alan Wolfe and Erik C. Owens's *Gambling: Mapping the American Moral Landscape*, a collection that addresses gambling from sociological, political, psychological, theological, anthropological, and legal perspectives. Additional works of note in the gambling studies literature include Henri Lesieur's *The Chase* (1977), Jon Elster and Ole-Jørgen Skog's *Getting Hooked: Rationality and Addiction* (1999), and Caitlin Zaloom's article "The Derivative World" in *The Hedgehog Review* (Summer 2010), which offers an anthropological examination of trading floors. Within the discipline of religious studies, the *locus classicus* for the subject is Clifford Geertz's theory of deep play in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973).

Pascal applies his work on probability to seemingly non-playful ends in offering an apology for the Christian faith in §418 of the *Pensées*.[92] In taking this highly scrutinized and cherished four-page fragment, which is entitled not "*Le Pari*" (the wager) but "*Infini rien*," as my subject matter in this chapter, I am setting out to accomplish three things. The first is to make the case that Pascal redeems play by employing the rhetorical strategy that he does. He could have made an argument for believing in God any number of other ways. It is significant that he chose to appeal to his audience through the trope of gambling. In accordance with this treatment of Pascal's apology as a game is the contention that Pascal rigs it to win. That is, I shed light on how he structures or contrives his argument so as to ensure success. That is my second aim. The third, which constitutes the bulk of what follows, is to offer a close reading of the text according to six polarities or paradoxes. These points of tension are: (1) the nature of the bet on God's existence as forced or free; (2) the impotence or importance of reason in the wager; (3) the gamble's immediate or reflective quality; (4) the status of passion as an obstacle or an aid to the bettor; (5) the all or nothing value of the stakes of the wager; and (6) the uncertain or sure character of its outcome. Sometimes Pascal oscillates between opposing poles, at other times he brings contradictory stances together. This way of handling the act of gambling on God roughly mirrors Pascal's redemptive treatment of play. Gambling is a sort of *divertissement*, after all, a sphere of activity for which Pascal maintains noticeable disdain precisely because it diverts people's attention from the important, the true, and the good. In presenting *un pari* to his libertine reader as benign and (what is much more) as infinitely life-enhancing, Pascal recuperates this form of play. He swings, as it were, his

---

[92] The two main editions of the *Pensées* are those of Louis Lafuma (1951) and Philippe Sellier (1976). These follow different orders of presentation, based on the copy from which they draw. The "*Infini rien*" fragment (§680 in Sellier) is included in the Series "*Discours de la machine*" in Sellier's edition. The numbering that I use in this chapter reflects the Lafuma edition. Except where noted otherwise, the translation is Krailsheimer's.

readers from one type of *divertissement* to another, moving them from wagers in which money is at stake to a singular wager on Christian theism in which the stakes are existential. Paradoxically, the form of the disease and the cure is the same.

I. *PENSÉES*—CONSIDERATIONS OF STYLE, AUDIENCE, AND AIM

Beyond being a mathematical genius, Pascal was a writer of substantial talent. Recognizing that a precise demonstration may bore rather than convince an audience, particularly an audience of boredom-eschewing libertines, he appreciated the power of a pleasing style (Force, "Pascal and Philosophical Method," 228). His approach in §418 may be understood in this light. To gamblers, he presented a gamble. Acknowledging the theory that Pascal resolves a problem by supplying a method specifically suited to it, Colas Duflo writes "[*i*]*l faut imaginer Pascal apologiste essayant de convaincre un chevalier de Méré libertin et l'on verra combien la solution est adéquate au problème. Voilà donc un pari*" (46). Similarly, Elster pointedly states in reference to the wager argument, the "fact that it is a form of gambling suggests that the intended reader is a gambler" ("Pascal and Decision Theory," 54).[93] Pascal's form is cleverly adapted to his content: By framing his argument as a wager, he drives his interlocutor *indirectly* to reflection. Thus, we notice diversion redoubling on itself. In an unexpected twist, the act of wagering channels the reader-player's attention *toward* matters of existential significance. What may be thought of as the typical, escapist purpose of play is undone.

Even though Pascal carefully constructed his argument to bring gamblers to assent to the existence of God, framing it in a specifically playful rhetoric, he did not expect his apology to be universally effective in bringing unbelievers to trust in God.

---

[93] John Boitano presents the issue of audience at length in his study *The Polemics of Libertine Conversion in Pascal's* Pensées: *A Dialectic of Rational and Occult Libertine Beliefs.* See in particular Chapter Two, section five, and Chapter Four, section one.

Such an aspiration would not accord with the underlying framework of his belief in the doctrine of grace. Regardless of how sound, rational, and convincing an apology for faith is, it is futile without the inspiring touch of God.[94] In setting forth his *pari* text, then, Pascal was attempting to open up space for a person to seek—or be sought by—God.

Another aim of §418 revolves around explicit intentionality. I contend that no matter how else the Wager may be understood, it should be seen as something like a forced vote. (Here we may think of the political procedure of cloture.) Through the text, Pascal confronts us and puts our choice—*infini* or *rien*—on record. He will try by logic, practice, and prayer to bring his readers to the side of infinite life. Regardless of which option his readers choose to follow, each one will be aware at the end of the game of having to make a decision. Theistic commitments will be strengthened, presumably, with the sense acquired over the course of the argument of their rationality and even probabilistic prudence. And atheism will be a little more costly for being adhered to consciously—seeing what is at stake and what may be lost. There are no longer any unknown rejections of God after undergoing Pascal's gambling apologetic.

With these introductory remarks dispensed, let us turn to a close reading of §418—the full text of which is included in English in the Appendix.

II. PASCAL'S DECISIVE PLAY: POLARITIES AND PARADOXES

(1) FREE AND FORCED

> *Even if Canada Bill [1820-1877] knew the game was rigged, he could not resist. Legend has it that he was stranded in a somnolent Louisiana town, nearly hallucinating with boredom, when he finally found a faro game and began to lose relentlessly. His partner took him aside. "The game's crooked," he warned. "I know it," Canada Bill answered, "but it's the only game in town."* –Lears

---

[94] "That is why those to whom God has given religious faith by moving their hearts are very fortunate, and feel quite legitimately convinced, but to those who do not have it we can only give such faith through reasoning, until God gives it by moving their heart, without which faith is only human and useless for salvation" (*Pensées*, §110).

In this section I will discuss features and implications of Pascal's claim, advertised in the punchy clause "*vous êtes embarqué*," that participation in a wager over whether or not to believe in God is mandatory. I will begin by setting out the general tension that exists between free and forced play and conclude by considering whether the paradox of play that is both free and forced is evinced and resolved in the "*Infini rien*" fragment itself.

Various definitions of play affirm its free character: it is conceived as a delimited activity freely chosen and knowingly entered.[95] It is possible to agree with this description and, at the same time, acknowledge that a game has rules: breach them too many times or too obviously and the game dissolves. (If someone plays but deliberately and surreptitiously refuses to abide by one or more of the rules, she undermines the integrity of the game by cheating.) A person's willingness to cede some of her freedom for a period—not acting in any way she wants but limiting her behavior to accord with the parameters of the activity—is necessary for the game to take place. It is imperative, however, that the player is aware that she is making this sacrifice; otherwise, a game is being played on her. At this level, necessity and freedom seem to co-exist unproblematically. Having constraints such as rules for the duration of play is not the same as being constrained *to* play, though.

As strange as the idea of forced play may seem, it is conceivable that obligations to play exist and take a variety of forms. A philosopher might look to Schiller's notion of the play drive and argue that, because we exercise our humanity in play, people must regularly seek forms of play to be human. If we stopped playing, something important about who we are would wither. For this reason, there is a serious need to take care to cultivate play in our lives. To take a less lofty case that is painful in its concreteness, one

---

[95] It is worth thinking through examples of unconscious play that nevertheless should count as play, elsewhere.

could consider addicted gamblers who experience almost unbreakable urges to play.

Some struggle to end a ruinous cycle of "chasing" money to recuperate losses or pay off

enormous debts; others take extreme measures like wearing adult diapers in order to

stay at slot machines longer (Elster, 209; Lears, 1). They experience, in a sense, a real

compulsion to play.

Pascal has a lot to say about people who, out of a felt need for *divertissement*, seek

it fervently, desperately. Individuals belonging to this group psychologically hooked on

play, a class that includes gamblers but also kings and common folks, rely on one

meaningless amusement after another as long as they refuse the sometimes lonely,

difficult, and even dreadful reflection that is borne of boredom. [96]

This largely unconscious need to avoid confronting oneself and instead escape

into diversions is the ailing condition from which Pascal tries to set his readers free.

Paradoxically—or redemptively—the medicine he uses to bring about the cure is

---

[96] It is important to note that Pascal affirmed diversion when it was properly sought. "Thus men who are naturally conscious of what they are shun nothing so much as rest; they would do anything to be disturbed. It is wrong then to blame them; they are not wrong to want excitement – *if they only wanted it for the sake of diversion*. The trouble is that they want it as though, once they had the things they seek, they could not fail to be truly happy" (from §136, emphasis mine). Earlier in the same *pensée*, Pascal addresses the subject of kings and diversion. With or without the Sun King in mind, he writes: "That is why men are so fond of hustle and bustle; that is why prison is such a fearful punishment; that is why the pleasures of solitude are so incomprehensible. That, in fact, is the main joy of being a king, because people are continually trying to divert him and procure him every kind of pleasure. A king is surrounded by people whose only thought is to divert him and stop him thinking about himself, because, king though he is, he becomes unhappy as soon as he thinks about himself." (Cf. §771, "Princes and kings sometimes play; they are not always on their thrones. They get bored there. Greatness needs to be laid aside to be appreciated, continuity in anything is tedious. It is pleasant to be cold so that one can get warm.")
I diverge from Tanner's analysis of the Wager in this particular aspect: I take a more favorable view of Pascal's use of unhappiness than she does. Tanner makes the charge that "[i]nto lives of apparent happiness [like the king's], Pascal is trying to inject the anxiety of insecurity and likely loss …" (250) and proclaims that her modified version of the wager takes the misery out of it (252). I agree with Pascal's estimation that even—or especially—very privileged people are troubled by vapid lives. And so I see his philosophy as responding to an already present unhappiness, a proclivity towards misery or melancholy that Pascal *identifies*. (He does not need to inject it into his portrait of existence.) This accords with the view I take of Pascal's method of argumentation, generally. I find him to seek to remain truthful while heeding ways—such as the use of the trope of gambling—to make his apology successful. Presumably, if he thought some people like kings were or could be happy without God, he would have maintained the same overall stance but adapted his argument to that reality (focusing instead on sinfulness, for example), rather than inserting descriptions of untrue sadness into his "Thoughts."

nothing other than a forced game.[97] He writes to them and turns their insistence on play against them, in a way that is ultimately for them. *You demand play? What happens when play is demanded of you?*

Laurent Thirouin notes that at each stage of the argument in §418 Pascal repeats that his unbelieving interlocutor is compelled to play (166). Thus, we find the text littered with "necessity" phrases: "*il faut parier,*" "*Cela n'est pas volontaire, vous êtes embarqué,*" "*il faut nécessairement choisir,*" "*il faudrait jouer (puisque vous êtes dans la nécessité de jouer),*" "*vous êtes forcé à jouer,*" "*étant obligé à jouer,*" "*quand on est forcé à jouer* …*" Even toward the end of the piece, Pascal has the interlocutor say for emphasis, "*On me force à parier, et je ne suis pas en liberté, on ne me relâche pas.*" The point is clear. There will be no weaseling out of this game from the start.

Therefore, when Pascal makes the point that the wager operates under stark conditions of constraint, he does not state that it is a game with many regulations or with particularly strict rules. Rather, the game is forced because everyone has to play it and, in fact, is already playing it.[98] In this, the locus of obligation rests in the person of the player as opposed to within the structure of the game in the form of the game's rules. Pascal detests ordinary diversion in its misapplication because it turns people away from the truths we most deeply need to acknowledge (like our infinitesimal place in an infinitely grand universe and our dependence on the God of the Bible).[99] By

---

[97] Pascal himself uses the analogy of sickness in his argument and writes about the remedy for unbelief. The importance of his aim of providing a *cure* grows when taken in conjunction with his purpose of bringing about a sense of *security* in making a decision to adopt Christian beliefs and behaviors ("cure" and "security" sharing the Latin root *cura*).

[98] As will be seen shortly, the exception is those individuals who have left the game by deciding not to believe in God.

[99] One representative fragment on boredom reads: "*Boredom.* Man finds nothing so intolerable as to be in a state of complete rest, without passions, without occupation, without diversion, without effort.
    Then he faces his nullity, loneliness, inadequacy, dependence, helplessness, emptiness.
    And at once there wells up from the depths of his soul boredom, gloom, depression, chagrin, resentment, despair" (§622).

burrowing the necessity to make a bet on the theism wager inside each person, Pascal removes the harmful potential of what is thought of as typical, secular diversion. Merely being born places a person in a betting situation, engaging him in a form of play (and a particularly risky one at that). This holds for everyone, not only libertines. We are all, existentially, gamblers.

What does it mean, though, that few if any people think of themselves as wagerers, players, in this way? Setting aside the objection that religious believers are unlikely to describe their commitments to follow God as a game they play or even a strategic choice they make, we might express the worry that there is something askance about a view in which the human condition is hidden from so many humans. To risk making an obvious statement, it is not common for people to think of the decision of whether or not to believe in God as a necessary game in which they are *ipso facto* engaged. Pascal's task is to show his interlocutors that they are already engaged in this play. In order for his position to be viable, does Pascal have to explain why people do not experience the forced play of wagering? Is it really the continual preoccupation with being preoccupied that causes (most) people to go through life without ever being aware of reaching a moment in which they weigh their options and resolve to stake their lives either on Christian theism or on atheism?[100] What of people who slide into Christian and atheistic ways of life without making a once-and-for-all decision to adopt their worldviews? And what of people who change their way midcourse?

I hold that Pascal does not repeatedly insist on the obligatory character of the wager in order to make a kind of empirico-psychological point—*look around and you will realize your life is one big game*—as much as to set his argument up for success—*you cannot*

---

[100] Of course, there are other choices beside Christian theism and atheism. In discussions of the "Many Gods Objection," it is commonly recognized that Pascal understood himself as having done the work of narrowing in on these two possibilities in the rest of his apology. By the time the reader would encounter the wager argument, other walks of life would no longer be under consideration.

disprove my probabilities of the four scenarios by opting out.[101] In this way, he needs the game

to be necessary. "*Since you must necessarily choose*, your reason is no more affronted by

choosing one rather than the other" (§418, emphasis mine). As Thirouin highlights, it is

only logical to risk eternity if you are forced to bet. If you are free to abstain from

playing around with such enormous stakes, you should. He writes on the rationality of

sitting out such a game, were it optional:

> Le pari du fragment 418 est un jeu imposé. Si l'on était libre, il faudrait être fou pour s'y risquer du moins sur la base de considérations mathématiques. Ce jeu est beaucoup trop dangereux et la prudence conseillerait de s'en écarter. L'espérance qu'il présente ne peut compenser pour un homme raisonnable le hasard qu'il fait courir. Mais il n'y a pas de liberté. « Il se joue un jeu […] où il arrivera croix ou pile ». Personne n'a choisi d'y prendre part ; le jeu est déjà en train de se dérouler. La question qui se pose à l'homme n'est plus de décider s'il veut jouer mais d'adopter une stratégie à l'égard de ce jeu où il est pris. Faut-il continuer à jouer ou non ? (155)[102]

This passage, with Thirouin's adept analysis, contains three points on which I would

momentarily like to alight. The first concerns the marvelous phrase from §418, "*[i]l se

joue un jeu*." The sentence in the Wager from which it is taken reads in full "*[i]l se joue un

jeu, à l'extrémité de cette distance infinie, où il arrivera croix ou pile: que gagerez-vous*?" and

has been alternately rendered "At the far end of this infinite distance a coin is being

spun which will come down heads or tails. How will you wager?" (Krailsheimer) and

"A game is in play at the far end of this infinite distance, where either heads or tails will

result. What's your wager?" (Rennie, 272) and "At the extremity of this infinite distance,

a game is being played in which heads or tails will turn up. How will you wager?"

---

[101] For this decision, the quadrants are: believing in a God who exists, believing in a God who does not exist, not believing in a God who exists, and not believing in a God who does not exist.

[102] "The wager of fragment 418 is an imposed game. If we were free, it would be crazy to risk ourselves at least on the basis of mathematical considerations. This game is much too dangerous and prudence would advise we keep our distance from it. The expectation that it presents cannot compensate a reasonable person for the risk that he runs. But there is no liberty. 'A game is played where there are only two possible outcomes: heads or tails.' No one chose to take part in it; the game is already in the process of being rolled out. The question that presents itself to a person is no longer one of deciding if he wants to play but of adopting a strategy in the face of this game of which he is already a part. Is it necessary to continue to play or not?" (translation mine)

(Ariew). To the second and third translations "a game is in play" and "a game is being played," I would like to suggest the possibility, heavy-handed as it may be, "a game plays itself." For Thirouin's explanation "*le jeu est déjà en train de se dérouler*," I would favor a similarly literally-slanted translation that nears personification in emphasizing that the game unrolls itself. In thinking about *Jeu* as that which animates the wager, I maintain not only that Play has agency but that this is the case at the same time that the burden of having to play is located within the individual person. *Il se joue un jeu* is lovely in its oddness and incomprehensibility precisely because it parallels the occasional moments in life in which a decision can exert itself as a force.[103] As with choosing a self in Kierkegaard's *Either/Or* and acting as a gamer and as an avatar, a paradoxical simultaneity is at work here. It is somehow possible for the player to play while the Play plays itself.

The second noteworthy point from this same sentence is the saying "*croix ou pile*," corresponding to the English idiom "heads or tails" (now expressed colloquially in French as *face ou pile*). The convergence of the image and language of *croix* in Pascal's writing on the wager is striking. *Croix* recalls the cross of Christ at the same time that it indicates a possible outcome of a coin toss. Krailsheimer provides a note that sheds light on the connection between the gambler's call and the "folly of the Cross," drawing attention to Pascal's reference to 1 Corinthians 1:18 in the preceding paragraph.[104] Other extensions of *croi-* may come to mind. After reading the word "*croix*," one might think of crossroads (*croisement*), and even—by association of sound rather than image—belief

---

[103] Mark C. Taylor expresses a similar point in his discussion of play and extraordinary experiences of time in an article for "The Immanent Frame" (06 Feb. 2008). He writes "[i]n this moment [of perfect contact of bat and ball], I no longer play but something else, something other plays through me." Taylor then relates this principle to Paul's statement in Galatians 2:20 about Christ inhabiting and living through him.

[104] The Louis Segond (1910) translation of this verse reads: « *Car la prédication de la* croix *est une folie pour ceux qui périssent; mais pour nous qui sommes sauvés, elle est une puissance de Dieu* » (emphasis mine).

(*croyance* from *croire*). Is belief in Jesus' crucifixion the crossroads at which one stands in deciding between *infini* and *rien*? What happens—*croix*, heads, appears and Christ wins?

Thirdly, Thirouin makes a subtle point in clarifying what it is the interlocutor is in a place to choose. This observation, which supports the worry that the structure of *le pari* is unjust, relates to a topic that will be explored in the fifth polarity—the potential in wagering for loss. Thirouin shows that a person is not deciding whether to play but whether to *continue* playing. The game that is all about making a choice is itself not chosen. To put the point in terms of freedom, Pascal's player is free to leave the game, but the game itself is forced. The game has been going on all along but the interlocutor can cause it, for himself, to cease by making a certain decision (the choice not to believe and to act as if God does not exist). Will the interlocutor in full awareness opt out of a game that he did not knowingly enter in the first place? And in "quitting," will he forfeit the stakes that he unwittingly wagered?

This is a point of fairness. Ordinarily, a player gives up money or goods as the cost of entering a game, stakes she knows she will lose if she withdraws early or experiences defeat. The problem in the case as Pascal sets it forward is that his wagerer never consents to the rules of the game (156). After Pascal brings his interlocutor to see that he must decide to live according to the belief that the biblical God exists or not, and after the interlocutor has considered, again with Pascal's guidance, the combinations of the likelihood and desirability of the four scenarios, he is in the position to exercise free, conscious choice. Again, approached thus, freedom is seen to follow a forced state.

But is there another liberty available to the libertine upon conversion—not merely the freedom to continue playing consciously but a positive freedom? For in making a decision for God, the *liber*tine would forsake a life defined even nominally by freedom. (As the Apostle Paul might ironically characterize it, a freedom from righteousness (Romans 6:20).) Pascal does not include the term "freedom" among the goods such as faithfulness, honesty, humility, gratitude, and true friendship that are to

be gained in living a Christian life. In pointing the libertine interlocutor to Christianity, however, he points him to Christ, whom Pascal identifies elsewhere as the Liberator (§269). "With Christ man is free from vice and wretchedness. In him is all our virtue and all our happiness" (§416). The libertine, once bound (*lié*) in unbelief, through the process of the wager is set free for faith, a just way of life, and *béatitude*.

At this point, it is fitting to step back and consider the place of these issues in the fragment from another level. In our reading, we have encountered both the oscillation between and the paradoxical relation of freedom and necessity. That is, we have seen that in a forced game a freely-made decision can lead to freedom for a religious life filled with virtue. Insofar as these ideas were culled from the text, they may be said to belong to it. But I think that it is also fair to recognize the external sources for the forced-yet-free paradox. First, Pascal himself does not signal in any stated way interest in the conflict or its resolution. Moreover, the tension between the essential freedom of play theoretically-construed and the necessity of the wager relies on philosophical understandings of play developed beyond the seventeenth century. The following questions with which I will end this section are therefore supplied as admittedly falling outside of the text's scope.

What kind of game is the Pascalian wager, if forced play is not simply unplayful but the antithesis of play? Is his wager a grave game on account of its obliged nature or is the seriousness and even precariousness of existence lightened by being approached in the name of play, which is commonly associated with whimsy and contingency? Is it fair play if someone tells you that you have played and lost a game you did not know you were playing? Is it necessary to go through necessity in order to reach freedom or can the game be played by other rules?

(2) REASON: IMPOTENT AND IMPORTANT

> *It came up black. Here I no longer remember either my reckoning or the order of my stakes. I only remember, as in a dream, that it seems I won sixteen thousand flourins, then, in three unlucky turns, I blew twelve of them; then I pushed the remaining four*

thousand onto passe *(but almost feeling nothing as I did it; I only waited somehow mechanically, without thinking)—and won again; then I won four more times in a row.* –Dostoevsky

In this section, I will briefly attend to Pascal's estimation of reason (in considering, for example, its interplay with the heart and its war with passions), drawing on several fragments from the *Pensées*. Then, I will describe the shifting place reason occupies within §418, demonstrating that although at the outset Pascal appears to cast reason to the side by denouncing its capacities, throughout his argumentation he actually takes great care to proceed rationally. Thirouin calls the contradictory movement of founding the renouncement of reason on reason *glissement*, a sliding (132). Lastly, before moving in the next section to the polar traits of immediacy and reflection that characterize wagering, I will ask in what way it is significant that Pascal holds both of these positions—reason is impotent, reason is important—at once.

Pascal is a pithy writer and so several of his memorable sayings (referred to as "*sentences*" in French) cast an easy light over the balanced attitude he maintains with respect to reason. Take, for example, the single line "[t]wo excesses: to exclude reason, to admit nothing but reason" (§183) together with the statement "[s]ubmission *and* use of reason; that is what makes true Christianity" (§167, emphasis mine).[105] Reading like proverbs, these fragments communicate a great deal about Pascal's theory of reason. In particular, they show how the thinker of double infinity moderates extremes. He turns in other *pensées* to the faculty of the heart as a counterpoising force. By doing so, he not only resists the alternate temptations to glorify and demonize reason, but also provides a description of existing in the world that resonates with readers today. Celebrated as much for its lyricism as its meaning, his claim that the "heart has its reasons of which reason knows nothing" (§423) captures an experientially and intuitively recognizable

---

[105] "Submission and Use of Reason" is also one of the section headings Pascal provides for the *Pensées*. In the Lafuma edition, it covers §§167-188.

truth. The mind may have desires obscure to the appetitive part of a person but the heart

has reasons belonging to it, to which a person's intelligence has no access.

It would be incorrect to suggest that Pascal balances his writing about reason by

praising passions. In fact, he blames the passions for preventing some people from

coming to faith in Christ. Rather, in another display of psychological realism, he

acknowledges that both factors exist and are responsible for shaping our lives. Like

other philosophers—Plato specifically comes to mind—Pascal describes the antagonism

between the two forces in strong terms. A fragment, which attests to the conflict,

poetically reads:

> Civil war in man between reason and passions.
>> If there were only reason without passions.
>> If there were only passions without reason.
>> But since he has both he cannot be free from war, for he can only be at
> peace with the one if he is at war with the other. (§621)

That reason must be discussed in relation to the passions shows the insufficiency of

reason. We cannot explain ourselves—or make a full transition into the way of faith—by

making recourse to reason alone; there is an unavoidable role for passions to play.

However, we should not assume that the intellectual faculty, whatever its greatness, is

strong enough to tame our passions automatically. It is only through a struggle on the

level of warfare that we may bring opposing factors under control.

Additionally, there is the corrective to reason found in §131, not quite Lutheran

in its degree of stridency—Pascal never calls reason a whore—but a harsh

pronouncement, nonetheless. Severely, he speaks to the tool of skeptical philosophers

and Platonists (and, we might add, mathematicians): "Be humble, impotent reason!" (Its

sting comes across even more clearly in the French: *Humiliez-vous, raison impuissante !*)

Ever the moderator, Pascal adds a command for nature, the favored child of dogmatists,

who were the sparring partners of skeptics. "Be silent, feeble nature!" This pair of

injunctions appears in a discussion spelled out over several pages of the dual condition

of human beings. Neither reason nor nature can provide an individual with a sense of self; Pascal insists that a person must turn to God for that.

Besides his use of the ideas of the heart and passions, Pascal leveled reason by including it with habit and inspiration as a source of religious belief. As noted earlier in explaining religious conversion, he affords a place to proofs, which come from logic, and behavioral patterns, which come from culture, but cites as the essential ingredient for forming faith inspiration, which comes from God. In its entirety, §808 reads:

> There are three ways to believe: reason, habit, inspiration. Christianity, which alone has reason, does not admit as its true children those who believe without inspiration. It is not that it excludes reason and habit, quite the contrary, but we must open our mind to the proofs, confirm ourselves in it through habit, while offering ourselves through humiliations to inspiration, which alone can produce the real and salutary effect. *Lest the Cross of Christ be made of none effect* [1 Cor. 1:17].

In citing §§131, 167, 183, 423, and 621 above, I sought to show provisionally that Pascal does not overprize reason. I include this *pensée* less to reaffirm the point about the nuance of Pascal's stance than to introduce key elements to the argument in "*Infini rien*." For, the paragraph of §808 seems to me to encapsulate important features of the Wager. It illuminates the idea of the interaction among the parts of the reason-habit-inspiration triad, at the same time that it marks the irreplaceable, uncontrollable quality of heavenly grace.

Reason and habit have roles to play in overcoming obstacles to belief, yet it is in inspiration that God provides the grace that makes faith, faith. As Moriarty states, "the rational proofs offered by Pascal cannot of themselves bring the state of conviction (not knowledge) that is imparted by God. But they can overcome intellectual obstacles to belief and prepare us to listen to the Christian message" (155). Moriarty further explains, "Christianity has reason on its side, but one whose belief is purely rational is no Christian" (157). Rather, it is the divine gift that enables belief. The posture conducive to receiving this gift is a humble one, which we bring about by acts and attitudes of self-lowering. "[One must] lay oneself open to inspirations. Strikingly, Pascal associates

inspiration here with the experience of humiliation: when our individual will is thwarted, our self-love wounded, and our ordinary complacent relationship with ourselves shattered, we are most open to the irruption of God's otherness – that is, to grace" (ibid.).

With this preliminary understanding in place, let us turn to a discussion of the two sides of reason's appearance in the Wager. The first of the two poles is the description of reason as impotent: "'Either God is or he is not.' But to which view shall we be inclined? Reason cannot decide this question." It is hard to underestimate the significance of Pascal's denigration of the faculty of reason and the role that such treatment plays in his argumentation. As Thirouin claims, "[i]*gnorance et contrainte sont les composantes nécessaires d'un pari*" (185). While Pascal, to be clear, never leaves the rationalist framework—unlike Kierkegaard, he is no fideist—he nevertheless bases his defense for believing in God on the *limitations* of the intellect. One of the ways that he rigs his argument for success is by weighing the scenarios (believing in a God who exists, not believing in a God who exists, believing in a God who does not exist, and not believing in a God who does not exist), according to a fifty percent chance that God exists. The way he gets to fifty-fifty odds is by insisting that the question of God's existence is *outside* of reason's purview. "Reason cannot make you choose either, reason cannot prove either wrong." He does not attempt to provide precise calculations for religious matters. Instead, Pascal assigns an "either/or" probability to the God of Christianity—the game is played under even odds.[106]

At the text's outset, he builds the case for reason's inadequacy for settling this question of whether to choose or deny God. He expends some effort providing conundrums that the mind is unable to resolve. For instance, we know that an infinite number exists and yet we also know that it is neither even nor odd. To take another

---

[106] His probability assignment is much criticized. As one person said, either the moon is made of cheese or it is not.

example that he gives: every human instantiation of justice suffers from so great a disproportion to God's justice that we are prevented from understanding God's character. He then extends the proof that we can know a thing's existence without knowing its nature, its quoddity (that-ness) but not quiddity (what-ness), applying it in the context of his Christian apology to the that-ness and what-ness of God. Where the divine is concerned, we are not even sure of the *quod*. Significantly, this is where rationality boldly reasserts itself.

Recognizing that even a proof for God's existence is not within reason's power is in no way a turning away from rationality; it is reasonableness itself. In a deft move, Pascal shows that lacking such a proof is not a deficit but a point in Christianity's favor. "Who then will condemn Christians for being unable to give rational grounds for their belief, professing as they do a religion for which they cannot give rational grounds? … It is by being without proof that they show they are not without sense." With these lines he at once acclaims reason and preserves the sense of divine mystery, which is vital to the Christian faith.

As part of this claim about the sensibility of Christianity, he alludes to "folly" (Latin: *stultitiam*, Greek: *môria*). This charged word is associated with 1 Corinthians 1:18 ("For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God"). In the following verses, the Apostle Paul contrasts the "folly of the Cross" with the "wisdom of the world," inverting the values of wisdom and folly. Speaking "foolishly," he continues, "[f]or God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength" (v. 25). Paul effectively makes a rhetorical point here, however nonsensical it is literally. Christians know that their own wisdom does not provide the ground for their faith. The lowest part of God, even divine folly, is exalted above the greatest philosophical prowess humankind can offer. This approach resembles to a degree Pascal's claim about the relative value of finitude in the light of the infinite. The idea of foolish wisdom, itself

an oxymoron, is paradoxical in another way, given that Pascal's wager argument is often described in terms of prudence.

Hugh Davidson draws together the elements of paradox and proof. In *The Origins of Certainty: Means and Meanings in Pascal's* Pensées, he writes of contradiction as a source of strength:

> Pascal wants to show that the Christians are not inconsistent in their conviction; and he does so by a paradox, which supplies out of itself the force of the proof. On the one hand Christians have no final, rational proof for what they believe, nor do they make any such claim. They know that their wisdom is folly, *stultitia*, and based on faith. It is by lacking proof and by bearing witness to a superior source of certainty that they attain consistency. Their situation is contradictory, but their strength arises precisely from a grasp of that contradiction. (22)

This passage reinforces the stance that living in contradiction is not problematic; rather, where weakness and irrationality enter is in a denial or a lack of recognition of that contradiction. Krailsheimer frames it in a slightly differently way, writing that the "paradox is that only reason can persuade reason of its own inadequacy" (xxiv). This understanding is also in line with Pascal's thought, echoing as it does the statement in §182 that there "is nothing so consistent with reason as this denial of reason." Reason's relation to itself is slippery, and so Pascal glides.

At the other end of this polarity is reason's importance in the Wager. There is sufficient textual evidence to make clear that Pascal upholds reason. This is seen explicitly, in individual statements he makes, as well as tacitly, in his use of logic. Interspersed in the argument are four lines that point to the favorable status of reason. These are his inclusion of reason and knowledge among the things at stake in the bet, his admonition to the libertine not to renounce reason in hoarding his life, his later comment that all gamblers or players take certain risk for uncertain gain without affronting or sinning against reason (*sans pécher contre la raison*), and his claim toward the conclusion

when he makes the push towards the passions that "reason impels you to believe."[107]

The high-yet-low status of reason relates to the question of forced belief. Pascal does not

advocate for willing oneself to believe against any evidence that reason supplies. On the

contrary, Pascal's point is that reason is not able to offer evidence.[108] It is on this ground

that Pascal may comfort the libertine by saying that reason is not offended by the choice

that the potential religious believer will make. But this reassurance is linked to the

necessity of choice: "Since you must necessarily choose, your reason is no more

affronted by choosing one rather than the other."

Beyond the respect he pays to reason in these phrases, there is also a rational

undercurrent running through the body of the fragment. What is the method of

decision-making that he proffers in its main sections, after all, if not a clear

representation of rationality? We will see in upcoming sections how he converts

existential risk into numerical expressions. More than working out the following

equations constructed on the basis of (one of three versions of) his argument

$$\infty = \text{Exp}(B) = \text{Pr}(G)U(B,G) + \text{Pr}(N)U(B,N)$$

and

$$-\infty = \text{Exp}(A) = \text{Pr}(G)U(A,G) + \text{Pr}(N)U(A,N)$$

it is important to note here the overall rational characteristic of Pascal's approach.[109] As

Thirouin finds, Pascal's mathematical demonstration gives the prestige of reasoning *par*

---

[107] This may be another instance in which Krailsheimer's translation is stronger than the French warrants. Pascal writes about reason *leading* one to belief; the "forcing" sense of "impels" is missing. "*Mais apprenez au moins que votre impuissance à croire, puisque la raison vous y porte …*"

[108] I thank Wayne Proudfoot for noting the relevancy here of the insight that you cannot believe where reason shows you otherwise.

[109] To translate roughly the formalizations of the argument from dominating expected value: Infinite is the expected value of believing in God, which equals the (greater than zero) probability that God exists multiplied by the utility of believing in God in the event that God exists, plus the (less than one) probability that God does not exist multiplied by the utility of not believing in God in the case that God does not exist.
Negative infinity is the expected value of acting as if God does not exist, which equals the probability that God exists multiplied by the utility of acting as if God does not exist in the case

excellence—geometry—to the status of the wager and its conclusion of the rightness of betting for God (133). And as the renowned biometrics scholar A.W.F. Edwards delineates, Pascal is rightly credited as the father of probability theory on the basis of his *Traité du triangle arithmétique*, which emerged from his correspondence with Fermat regarding games of chance—a rational accomplishment with profound scientific applications, indeed (40-42).

Lastly, let us contrast the way that Pascal delimits reason from experiences of thoughtlessness. In some situations and for some people, the pleasure play has to offer is escape from thinking about personal problems.[110] In an intense moment of a game that requires your fiercest attention, such as needing to concentrate on counting cards in a round of poker or ensuring that you keep your balance as you walk across a dangerously-high tightrope, there is no room for thinking about anything else, anything ordinary. In losing yourself, you lose—momentarily—your problems. As Pascal unfolds it, the wager does not involve an abandonment of reason or reflection in this way.

(3) GAMBLING 'IN' TIME: IMMEDIACY AND REFLECTION

> *However, I don't remember what I thought about on the way; there were no thoughts.* –Dostoevsky

> *Suzuki quoted the Zen master Tenno Dogo, who stopped a disciple from pondering his advice by saying: "No reflecting whatever. When you want to see, see immediately. As soon as you tarry [that is, as soon as an intellectual interpretation or mediation takes place], the whole thing goes awry."* –Lears

> *[I]n the ethical I am raised above the moment, I am in freedom.* –Kierkegaard

---

that God does exist, plus the probability that God does not exist multiplied by the utility of acting as if God does not exist in the case that God does not exist.
Numerous sources provide explanations of Pascal's proof and differentiate between his arguments from dominance, expectation, and dominating expectation. See, e.g., Ian Hacking's illustrious *Introduction to Probability and Inductive Logic* (Chapter 10, "Decision under Uncertainty") from which these equations are taken, and Jeff Jordan's *Pascal's Wager: Pragmatic Arguments and Belief in God*.

[110] There is the irony, however, of games (like gambling) engendering life problems.

Another indication of the extraordinariness or strangeness of Pascalian gambling is its characterization with respect to time. This wager on one's way of life is far from being an experience of immediacy such as Dostoevsky describes, not only because of the time required to follow or make Pascal's calculations of probability—the tarrying of reflection is certainly involved in determining and then sorting through the relevant equations—but because of Pascal's emphasis on the (eternal) future and not the now. In "*Infini rien*," gambling is future-, not "flow"-, oriented. It is the conduit for deciding one's eternal lot rather than a technique for losing a sense of time or living "in the now." And while this decisive gambling occurs *in time*, "[t]o be in time is to be faced with the either-or of decision," it is for the sake of the hereafter (Taylor, *KPA*, 7).

Before discussing in more detail the ideas of immediacy (as spontaneity[111] and speed) and reflection (as the wise and time-consuming determination of actions in light of their aftermath), I would like to make clear how I am approaching this section. First, the opposition between gambling in the instant and gambling on the infinity of time does not, in my estimation, find resolution in Pascal's argument. Of the polarities I am discussing, it is one that remains. Unlike the case of reason, it is not dialectically uplifted or treated paradoxically. (Pascal is not asking Kierkegaard's question in the *Philosophical Fragments* of how a historical moment can serve as the point of departure for eternal happiness. This is another reason to consider the play of Pascal's Wager in conjunction with Kierkegaard's category of ethics rather than aligning it with Kierkegaard's category of religiousness.) Secondly, this is in no way an accusation of failure on Pascal's part, for I do not think that he sets out to mediate these two very different modes of time. Rather, as with the tension between freedom and necessity, this is a polarity that I see my analysis introducing to the Wager more than identifying as internal to it.

---

[111] I am employing "spontaneity" in a particular sense. As will become clear, by spontaneous choices, I intend ungrounded choices that arise arbitrarily. This usage contrasts Kant's treatment of the spontaneous will as free from determination by antecedent conditions.

Along the broad spectrum of contemporary forms of gambling are types of gambling that privilege intuition. These gambling games resist systematization and have no use for strategy. Instead, they urge reliance on gut feelings. They are the antithesis of regular work and earned wages. Whereas laborers receive predictable paychecks for their scheduled efforts, gamblers stand to gain surprisingly sudden payoffs on the basis of luck. Under this portrait of games of chance (which, again, differ from forms of gambling that involve quite a bit of deliberation), gambler's choices may said to be spontaneous in an impromptu, instantaneous way.

Immediacy is also seen in play's speed. Games of gambling move fast. They are designed to do so, as a way of roping players into their absorbing, and costly, realm. There may not be time to reflect overly on which wager to make in games of chance—hence one's reliance on intuition—but neither is there time to think enough to stop the play. "The gaming industry employs the intimate experiential requirements of the zone to encourage gamblers to play 'faster, longer, and more intensively'" (Zaloom, 24).[112]

Pascal's use of the trope of gambling in the context of making a choice of religious adherence seems exactly opposite to this, with respect to time. §418 is not designed to induce fervent (or fervently repeated) play at all. There is no being on a roll or hitting a hot streak here, insofar as repetition is missing. This relates to a recurring worry I have had as I have tarried with this text. It deals with the number of times the wager can occur and the finality of one's choice. Is the game set up in such a way as to be repeatable? More pointedly, is it possible to reverse one's bet? Is that not, in some way, what Pascal is asking his libertine interlocutor to do in the first place, in advocating conversion, i.e., beckoning him to change positions and stop staking his life on a system of beliefs on which he had unwittingly bet? Keeping in mind the crossroads imagery in

---

[112] Dostoevsky points to the incremental dimension of speed: "The next day she definitively lost everything. That's how it had to happen: once that kind of person starts out on this path, then, like sliding down a snowy hill on a sled, it all goes faster and faster" (278).

Kierkegaard's *Either/Or*, we might wonder whether a person who makes the wrong decision today can come back tomorrow and play again. What does she or he lose in delaying or backtracking? Is that where the real risk lies—in not knowing when your time is up and re-betting will be impossible? We have noted that someone discontinues play by deciding to act as if God does not exist, but does wagering on God's existence not put an end to the game, too? For, how would a person continue playing after betting on theistic belief—does one "level up," advancing to a new plane of the game after making the choice of ascribing to Christianity? Or is it that one reaffirms one's "move" in living out the decision day to day? To condense or intensify these questions, I will ask lastly of the wager on God: Is this one gambling game that I do not have to play quickly because I play it under the starkest time constraint—not immediately, but *once and for all*?

After drawing the comparison between casino gamblers and financial traders, ("[s]imilarly, traders engage with machines and frame their senses of physical and social space to merge with the flow the market"), Zaloom describes traders' heightened awareness of the present time, the moment. She writes, "[t]raders' techniques of self-discipline can seem deeply ascetic, and often mystical. Under discipline's strictures, traders must immerse themselves in the present; the market lives in the here and now" (24, 26).[113,114] The 1920s and 30s New York sportswriter Damon Runyon, renown for his storytelling and formalism, represents the same attitude towards time in his writing on gamblers. "In a sense, Runyon's gamblers inhabited *an eternal present*, epitomized by his use of the historical present tense—'So I says to this guys, I says …'—a usage inspired

---

[113] It is interesting how recovery as well as play takes place for extreme gamblers as a matter of immediacy. Recovering addicts conquer their pangs to play not once and for all but moment by moment, which makes sense of the slogan "one day at a time." Kierkegaard describes this principle when he writes: "imagine a person who has become addicted to gambling. Desire awakens in all its passion; it is as if his life would be at stake if his desire is not satisfied. If he is able to say to himself: At this moment I will not do it; I will not do it for an hour—then he is cured. This hour is the continuity that saves him" (*Either/Or*, II, 230).

[114] On gambling mystics, cf. Lears, 243.

by the gamblers' own, which Runyon faithfully transcribed. Runyonland was a world elsewhere, where gambling was a way of *killing time*" (Lears, 268, emphasis mine). Zaloom and Runyon's depictions of ordinary gamblers' experience of time and immediacy relate to play under the *aesthetic* realm.[115] To make the distinction once more: in his discourse, Pascal does not cultivate an intense atmosphere in which speed overcomes reflection or in which present-tense experiences stretch into the future and overcome the past. This is one of the primary ways in which his gambling differs from other forms. And so Pascal, recognizing that "[r]eason works slowly" (§821), proceeds in his gambling with rational, even systematic, reflection and encourages his interlocutor to take heed for the future.

The religious wager of §418 relates to wisdom in this way, wisdom (like hope) being directed beyond the present. In principle, it is a mark of folly to live without a sense of consequences whereas it is wise to do something difficult today in order to be pleased with the situation one finds oneself in tomorrow. This holds with regard to a person's religious choices, only on a much grander scale. Deciding to follow God is a prudential bet because it measures the cost of present earthly sacrifices against the worth of future goods—the infinite good of God's infinite and eternal presence.

Although there is a feeling of urgency surrounding this forced bet on the basis of the importance of believing in God and the magnitude of the potential reward, Pascal never explicitly demands that his interlocutor or reader make a decision right away and certainly not before the work of calculation is done. The closest he comes to rushing the discussion (or decision) is in making the statement that, given the combination of

---

[115] Recall how the figure of the aesthete in Kierkegaard "kills time" too: "For the immediate aesthete, the unalterable flow of time means the necessary negation of the present moment of pleasure. The pleasurable moment in which the immediate aesthete seeks to immerse himself always passes. His efforts are then directed to finding another moment in which to lose himself. But here too the moment passes. For the reflective aesthete, the transition from the realm of imaginative idealities to temporal actuality involves the movement into the realm of historical travail in which ideas are only gradually and partially realized. … The aesthete, either through sensual enjoyment or through imaginative reflection, is engaged in what Kierkegaard calls 'killing time.' He avoids decision" (Taylor, *KPA*, 183).

probability and payout (a chance of winning an infinite reward countered by only a finite number of chances of losing), "there is no room for hesitation." "*[I]l n'y a point à balancer* [*hésiter*]."[116] This is in line with the other half of his observation in §821 that feeling differs from reason in that it "works instantly, and is always ready." That is why he states that there comes a point when we must "put our faith in feeling, or it will always be vacillating" (ibid.). With the time of calculation and reflection having already been invested, and the options already weighed, there is no more need for balancing, wavering, oscillating, or waiting. It is time to act. Reason having decided it, passions and practice must be addressed.[117]

(4) PRAGMATIC WAYS AND MECHANICAL EXERCISES FOR *IN-CORPORATING* BELIEF:

PASSION AS OBSTACLE AND AID

> *For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will [thelein] what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want [thelô], but the evil I do not want [ou thelô] is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want [ou thelô], it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. So I find it to be a law that when I want [thelonti] to do what is good, evil lies close at hand.* –Apostle Paul

Passion never fully subsides in the wager *pensée*. Even though Pascal talks in stringent terms of diminishing one's passions on the road to faith, it is clear that the libertine interlocutor retains desires. Significantly, though, these desires have been retrained to have God as their object and not worldly pleasures. Such a shift is noticeable

---

[116] It is Sellier and Ferreyrolles who provide the note on *hésiter*.

[117] Pascal's treatment of reason and passion's relation to time finds a strong parallel in a passage in the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. Contrasting objective and subjective knowledge, Kierkegaard (or Climacus) writes "whereas objective knowledge goes along leisurely on the long road of approximation, itself not actuated by passion, to subjective knowledge every delay is a deadly peril and the decision so infinitely important that it is immediately urgent, as if the opportunity has already passed by unused" (200). The way that Climacus mocks the "objective person" who "put[s] a whole research period into finding God" resonates—in content, if not in tone—with Pascal's view of reason's willingness to take indefinite time in weighing matters. Passion, it seems, never wants to stall. Who has ever thought of passion as patient?

in the aftermath of reason's own transformation from objecting to faith to assenting to the rationality of Christian belief.

In Pascal's thought there is a loose alignment of the heart and passion, desire, pleasure, sentiment, whim, fancy, and the body. At the same time, there is a correlation between the body and the machine, practice, habit, exercise, experience, custom, and action.[118,119] Without being interchangeable, these ideas share a kind of categorical space under the rubric of "heart." Thus, it is with a consideration of Pascal's estimation of *le coeur*—specifically its physical character and its connection to custom—that I would like to begin this section on the twofold quality of passion in "*Infini rien*."

Pascal's appraisal of the heart's abilities vis-à-vis reason's limitations is fascinating, for he identifies the heart—and not the mind—as the seat of first principles (Force, "Pascal and Philosophical Method," 220). This echoes a point made earlier in this chapter's section on the second polarity. There, I noted that tension between the passions and reason indicates that the scope of reason is far from being all-encompassing. Here, we see as a sign of reason's insufficiency its dependence on the faculty of the sentiment for its (the sentiment's) intuition of concepts such as time, number, and space. It is worth drawing out this principle of the interplay between the mind and body, reason and the heart, because it holds on different levels for Pascal, including on the plane of the formation of faith.

Pierre Force sets forward Pascal's view of the heart, explaining a rather surprising stance that Pascal holds. "For Pascal, this shortcoming [of not seeing that space can be divided *ad infinitum*] is *akin to a physical disability*. Indeed, when Pascal identifies the heart as the organ that perceives the first principles, he means that there is

---

[118] We might contrast this list with a set of reason's correlates, including the mind, intellect, knowledge, and prudence.

[119] On the relation between the heart, fancy, and fantasy, see Force, "Pascal and Philosophical Method," 226.

something inherently bodily and physical about this perception" (224, emphasis

mine).[120] That is why Pascal proposes (indeed, with its curative sense, *prescribes*)

actions—physical, bodily actions—for the interlocutor whose passions have not yet

succumbed to a Christian pattern of life. The turn to practical, behavioral devices (in the

dual sense of techniques and mechanical tools) is crucial because, without being worked

on, recalcitrant passions hinder a religious seeker's progress. Let us continue

approaching the important role of pragmatism in the Wager, then, by way of the

example of discerning first principles.

An individual who lacks intuition of matters such as time or the infinite

divisibility of space is not doomed to ignorance. Exercise and experience, precisely in

their physicality, can serve as a bridge to a discovery of natural truths for such a person.

Force illuminates the role Pascal affords exercise, experience, and mechanical

apparatuses as follows:

> [F]or those who have no natural intuition of infinite division, Pascal proposes to
> use a telescope to observe a point in the sky that looks very small to the naked
> eye. They will discover that this apparently indivisible point is in fact a huge
> chunk of space. It is thus conceivable that with an even better telescope this small
> point would seem as large as the firmament does to the naked eye, and so on
> (*OC* II, 165-6). What Pascal proposes here is an *exercise*, based on the assumption
> that our grasp of first principles resides in the body, not in the mind. It is
> therefore essential to *experience* something similar to infinite divisibility in order
> to have an intuition of it. (232, original emphasis)

The exercise of looking through the mechanical device of a telescope helps someone

overcome a limited sense of the concept of infinite division. Similarly, *once reason has*

exhausted its ability to bring about true, inner conviction, ritual practices can serve to propel

a wavering convert over the hurdle of indecision and into belief. As the well-known

---

[120] See *Pensées*, §110, "We know the truth not only through our reason but also through our heart.
It is through the latter that we know first principles, and reason, which has nothing to do with it,
tries in vain to refute them. … Principles are *felt*, propositions proved, and both with certainty
though by different means" (emphasis mine). Significantly, Pascal goes on to give claims about
humility and certainty. "… Our inability must therefore serve only to humble reason, which
would like to be the judge of everything, but not to confute our certainty."

phrase reads, "taking holy water, having masses said" will organically lead, with the aid of God, to the full-fledged adoption of Christianity.

It is important to emphasize the context of Pascal's recommendation for treating passions by a course of action. The interlocutor has been moved to a place where he sees the reasonableness of faith but cannot bring himself to believe. This is evident in his response to Pascal's victorious declaration at the end of the demonstration by probability assessment ("This is conclusive and if men are capable of any truth this is it"). The libertine replies by saying both "I confess it, I admit it" and "I am so made that I cannot believe." Reason has reached its limit; multiplying proofs is a useless exercise because the rational part of the man is *already* in agreement with faith, but that is not enough for faith to take hold. This is a key observation. If the problem *were* still one of reason, then it would be appropriate to continue with argumentations and proofs because they belong to the rational realm. But the libertine has reached a place of intellectual assent. He goes on to ask Pascal "What do you want me *to do* then" because it is with *doing* that he has a problem.

The solution that Pascal offers is both mechanical and communal. A dossier heading that he supplies elsewhere, *Le Discours de la machine*, and his use within §418 of the verb *s'abêtir* ("to stupefy," "to make docile") attest to the fact, however appalling, that he treats the struggling libertine who is on the cusp of a faith commitment as a machine: an automaton. He beckons him to perform repeated actions in an unthinking way, assuring him that this will tame his passions and cure his unbelief. In addition to what we may infer from Pascal's life—his own passionate disposition and his inclination toward "workable ideas"—we learn why he adopted this strategy from his other reflections.[121] In particular, *pensées* §§816 and 821 are revealing and may make such a fraught approach more palpable.

---

[121] Of Pascal's character Mesnard writes, "[h]e had the temperament of a man of action, a love for grandiose undertakings … This ardent zest for life, moreover, was often transformed in Pascal

In §821 Pascal makes claims that accord with positions of his that we have already seen, specifically the appropriate way of argumentation and the relationship between the mind and body. (§821 is also the source for his view on the speed and difficulty of thought that was cited in the section on time.) Explaining the persuasive power of practice, he writes:

> [W]e are as much automaton as mind. As a result, demonstration is not the only instrument for convincing us. … Proofs only convince the mind; habit provides the strongest proofs and those that are most believed. It inclines the automaton, which leads the mind unconsciously along with it. … It is, then, habit that convinces us and makes so many Christians. It is habit that makes Turks, heathen, trades, soldiers, etc. … [W]e must resort to habit once the mind has seen where the truth lies, in order to steep and stain ourselves in that belief which constantly eludes us, for it is too much trouble to have the proofs always present before us. We must acquire an easier belief, which is that of habit. With no violence, art or argument it makes us believe things, and so inclines all our faculties to this belief that our soul falls naturally into it. … We must therefore make both parts of us believe: the mind by reasons, which need to be seen only once in a lifetime, and the automaton by habit … *Incline my heart* [Psalm 119:36].

Here he states quite explicitly his reasoning about the roles—and sequential order—of reason and habit. While the mind and heart are interconnected, habit surpasses reason in scope and outpaces reason in speed. For, there is an ease and efficacy in ongoing practice that escapes the intellect with its shortcomings in demonstration and, on the occasions in which reason does achieve proof, its short span of success (the single moment). That is why it is essential to undergo a change in heart, confirming conviction with custom.

---

into a dominating pride. Conscious of his own supreme genius, Pascal as a scientist could brook no contradiction and showed himself merciless to such adversaries as Father Noël or Father Lalouère. Pascal the convert was never able, moreover, wholly to root out and destroy this natural arrogance; in a moment of anger he could terrify Singlin, whose inadequacies on the intellectual plane could not escape him; he humiliated Arnauld and Nicole when he made it clear that he thought their conduct pusillanimous. This need to dominate over other souls, though much purified by Pascal's conversion, explains, no doubt, his violence and impetuosity as a religious apologist. But this violence and impetuosity can also be considered as a kind of passion. There is, in Pascal, a passion for truth in all its shapes; this is seen as clearly, in spite of the reservations we have occasionally thought fit to make, in Pascal's investigations into the nature of a vacuum as in his controversies about the formula. *Even more, there is in Pascal a passion for the infinite* …" (182, emphasis mine).

The libertine is understandably reluctant to forgo a life of pleasure for the sake of a faith that still does not hold the force of certainty for him. Pascal makes clear, however, that he will not arrive at the point of faith *unless* he gives up his (noxious) pleasures. *Pensée* §816 contains his argument for this reversal. It reads in full:

> 'I should soon have given up a life of pleasure,' they say, 'if I had faith.' But I tell you: 'You would soon have faith if you gave up a life of pleasure. Now it is up to you to begin. If I could give you faith, I would. But I cannot, nor can I test the truth of what you say, but you can easily give up your pleasure and test whether I am telling the truth.'

This empiricism-tinged advice is yet another display of Pascal's realism. He does not entertain his desire to bestow faith on an unbelieving libertine because transferring belief to another person is simply not feasible. The libertine's claim that he will surrender his pleasure-filled life after converting poses further problems for verification. The option that is possible, although probably not as easy as Pascal describes, is for the libertine to follow the path Pascal lays down. Returning to "*Infini rien*," we see that there is social precedence for this course of action as well.

On the one hand, then, Pascal's suggestion for surmounting passions is engaging in "automatic" practices. On the other, it is a recommendation rooted in the community. This is not only because the libertine will be taking communion alongside Christians in a public, church setting, but also because he will be following the example of other people who successfully overcame the obstacles he finds himself currently facing. "You want to be cured of unbelief and you ask for the remedy: learn from those who were once bound like you and who now wager all they have. These people who know the road you wish to follow, who have been cured of the affliction of which you wish to be cured: follow the way by which they began." The libertine who is on his way to faith is not alone—in his struggles or in their enacted solutions. This social component of the Wager should not be overlooked in part because of the ramifications it has for an understanding of Pascal's philosophy broadly. That is, it would not be suitable to group Pascal among philosophers who focus on the individual to the detriment of the community because

Pascal does not isolate the libertine in causing him to come to terms with his individual existence and forced religious choice. Perhaps unexpectedly, the room afforded community in his argument also relates to descriptions of the social bonds formed among everyday gamblers.[122]

Having explained at some length the notion of the heart for Pascal and the primary expression that *les passions* take in the discourse, I would like to devote the remainder of this section to expositing a second side of desire in §418. This "flip" side comes from my interpretation, rather than an explicit rendering on the part of Pascal. That is, Pascal does not make the claim that desires undergo a reversal—or even a reordering à la Augustine—in the course of making and enacting the decision to follow Christ. He commands *taming*, not transforming, the passions. However, I will seek to show that there is a positive use of "wanting" in the path to salvation based on Pascal's repeated use of the verb *vouloir* toward the end of the argument.[123]

Earlier we noted the many "necessity" phrases appearing in the Wager. Here, it is desire that we find multiplying. Pascal addresses his interlocutor with these statements: "[*v*]*ous voulez aller à la foi*" and "[*v*]*ous voulez vous guérir de l'infidélité*," "… *ce sont gens qui savent ce chemin que vous voudriez suivre et guéris d'un mal dont vous voulez guérir*." He even has the interlocutor use starkly passionate language in his response, "'*Ô ce discours me transporte, me ravit*' …" While I do not want to overstate the point, I think it is significant that Pascal frames the remarks to and from the interlocutor in this way and not, for example, with colder terms or with the language of duty. He could have used an

---

[122] For example, William Thompson writes about several of the functions that numbers games served historically among African Americans in urban settings. In addition to being run by local people and giving another means of savings than keeping money in banks that practiced discrimination, the "numbers game also contributed to community solidarity, as residents would share dreams with each other" (88). As a way of confirming this, he shares the story of Colin Powell's family who, amazingly, won the money to buy their house in Queens from playing the numbers game.

[123] Desire is implicitly present earlier, in the assignment of utilities. The libertine *desires* happiness and therefore, with Pascal, values an infinity of infinite happiness infinitely.

alternate construction like *Il faut croire* or *Il faut que vous croyiez*. What might it mean that he chooses (if not emphasizes) the wish of the skeptic or libertine to believe?

At the same time that Pascal instructs the reader to seek to diminish his passions actively, desire and pleasure spring up elsewhere—in a way oriented to faith. As Force says, "[t]he goal here [in directing the reader to practical steps, or ritual practices] is to help the reader put God rather than the objects of his passions as the first principle of his pleasure" (233). Desire is a hard thing to stifle altogether; it is easier to manage passions by redirecting them. Thus, the passages in the Wager that address behavior reveal in some way what happens when God is the primary object of an individual's desire.

In sum, passions and pragmatism conjoin in the Wager. This is because the Christian faith addresses itself to the whole of people's lives. If it neglected either the physical or the spiritual and mental aspects of our being, it would be incomplete. As the religious tradition maintains itself, then, through creeds and rituals, so the process of coming to belief involves mind, heart, and body. Pascal recognizes this in his apology. Becoming a follower of Christ entails more than intellectually assenting to Christ's existence. It must include in-corporating Christ, taking him into one's body through communal practices, including—not incidentally—the bodily and spiritual Eucharistic ritual.

After Pascal admonishes him to overcome his passions by acting in compliance with the Christian tradition, the libertine confesses that he is afraid. In what may be read as a flippant tone, Pascal replies, "What do you have to lose?" Absolutely everything, it seems at first.

(5) GOING "ALL IN" BY STAKING NOTHING

> *Nothing could stir her in any way or cure her of an underlying feeling of boredom constantly springing to life again, except the idea that she was putting her whole existence at hazard.* –Stendhal

Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ, and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on Christ. –Apostle Paul

Thus far in the Wager we have encountered polarities and paradoxes—observing oscillation between opposing sides (as with immediacy and desire) and the holding of contradictory views at the same time (the paradox of free constraint and the rational suspension of reason). Now we come to the two remaining reversals, the remarkable movement from valuing the stakes one puts in the game as everything to regarding them as nothing, on the one hand, and the shift from feeling risk to certainty, on the other. Pascal advertises explicitly that undergoing the course of salvation brings about these *bouleversements*—"overturnings"—when he addresses his imagined interlocutor and says, "[y]ou will know at the end that you have wagered on something *certain* and *infinite* for which you paid *nothing*" (emphasis mine). Though these aspects of totality and risk are linked, I will address them individually, beginning in this section with the changing valuation of what is being staked in betting on God.

A close reading of §418 will show a particular undoing of totality. It is not the case, in the end, that in deciding to follow God a person does not put in her all; anything less than her all and she forfeits the game. Rather, it is that her all is not worth "all." Explication of Pascal's argument will lead, moreover, to the view that a person's all is nothing! That is why, according to him, a saved libertine who has received everything *for* nothing looks back and, like the Apostle Paul in his letter to the Philippians (3:7-9), declares the worthlessness of what had been his everything.[124] From where one now stands as a saved person, one evaluates former treasures as rubbish. Only trash!

---

[124] The tendency to minimize what one gives up in this godly gamble relates indirectly to an interesting finding about (regular, i.e., non-Pascalian) gamblers' psychology, which Elster includes in his essay "Gambling and Addiction" for the anthology *Getting Hooked*. Gamblers can be surprisingly accurate in predicting their losses. Often, when people bet, they clearheadedly

How does one get from *rien* to *infini*? Interest in the infinitely-all/nothing dichotomy is persistent in Pascal's writings. He worked extensively on the scientific problem of the vacuum, giving a great deal of thought to the notions of emptiness and spatial void, and theorized in several places about double infinity. Did he supply "Infinity nothing" as the heading to this groundbreaking thought experiment to emphasize the extent of the difference between the divine and human sides of the wager, giving priority to the truth of this discrepancy instead of highlighting the motif of gambling, with its associations of risk and play? Does "Infinity nothing" direct readers' attention to the vast distance between God and ourselves, and the magnitude of the division between God's role and ours in bringing about salvation? In short, does it point us to grace? The possibility that Pascal's provisional title works to remind us of the gap between the payout and the stakes in this game echoes Lears's premise in his study that gambling, like grace, is the exchange of nothing for something. Radical divine generosity effaces whatever contribution is made on the part of human beings: in the light of infinity, finitude's offerings are nothing but nothingness.

As he enters his discussion of probabilities, Pascal divides the elements he wishes to consider into three categories. These are the things a bettor stands to lose ("the true and the good"), the things a bettor stakes (reason and knowledge, will and happiness), and things that a bettor should seek to avoid (error and wretchedness). Curiously, as he sets up the division of his analysis, he refrains from making "rewards" a fourth group, folding instead those things that a bettor might win into his thoughts on the stake—*mise*—of happiness. With respect to happiness, Pascal's choice of terminology is noteworthy. In referring to it, he does not use *bonheur* but the religiously-charged word *béatitude* (found, famously, in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5).

---

realize that they will lose, even great amounts. What they are poor in predicting is their reaction to those losses—under the sway, perhaps, of the thrill of play, they underestimate the emotional *effect* the losses will have on them (222).

It is also significant that he does not immediately state that the wagerer's life or self is at stake, but rather points initially to the reason and will, and their relative complements, knowledge and happiness. Later, though, he does make use of a phrase about risking *life* and so it becomes clear that a person hazards her very existence in this wager.[125] Perhaps this is a taunt to libertines. He offers them the most thrilling game of their lives, an experience of play that takes them farther from boredom than any ordinary diversion or pastime ever could.

As noted, Pascal was confident of the rationality of wagering on religion. And so, sure that he had dispensed with the concern that one would lose the stake of reason ("[t]hat is one point cleared up"), he swiftly moves to consider the other element pledged in playing the wager: happiness.[126] Relying on an implicit relation between happiness and rewards (and, I suppose, between unhappiness and penalties), he assesses the gains and losses of *one* of two possible scenarios, focusing exclusively on the case of calling heads, *croix*, God exists. He does not give voice to the choice of calling tails, *pile*, in the possibility of God's *non*-existence. If you bet on God and win, he says, you win everything. If you bet on God and lose, you lose nothing. The dichotomy between everything and nothing (*tout*/*rien*) is established, but how does Pascal arrive at infinity?

His description in broad, all-or-nothing strokes is not enough for the imagined interlocutor, who registers his concern in replying, "[y]es, I must wager, but perhaps I am wagering too much." In other words, is it possible to hedge my bets, choosing God but keeping something in reserve for myself in case God does not exist or does not lavishly reward belief? It is not difficult to comprehend a person's inclination to hold

---

[125] Cf. §150.

[126] Is it possible to view Pascal—alongside ethicists such as Plato and Aristotle—as a *eudaimonist* on the basis of this part of the *Pensées* and the argument he builds in §148 around the simple and strong statements "All men seek happiness. There are no exceptions. … The will never takes the least step except to that end"?

back, as it is possible to see the appeal of the aesthetic lifestyle in Kierkegaard's

Either/Or. Why is it wrong to "hoard" one's life in making a decision to live without

God?[127] How would that choice against God lead to unhappiness, especially given our

palpable sense of the certainty of earthly life and the unknown existence and nature of

the hereafter?

Here as Pascal refines his argument, he introduces artificial, even puzzling,

calculations—comparing, measuring, and weighing the stakes against the rewards. He

appeals to the desirability of a good exchange and the commonsense willingness to

sacrifice a thing of some worth for the sake of receiving a greater thing. The life that is

on the balance—*your* life—is, it is true, your only life on earth. It is, to that extent, your

everything. This being the case, though, it bears only a finite utility. The *totality* of

anything finite is still finite, regardless of the increase that totality represents over

partiality of the same thing.

What is on the other side, then—that of the prize—which makes putting in all

that you have and are a good bet? Pascal eventually assigns infinite value to the eternal

reward for belief; however, at the start he tests his argument with concrete but

hypothetical number values. (Keep in mind that each of his proffered scenarios is

predicated on "even odds" as well as the necessity of playing in the first place.) He

suggests that his interlocutor determine a course of action by balancing the costs of

---

[127] Whether or not Krailsheimer's decision to translate *garder* with the strong-sounding word "hoard" is justified, it raises an interesting possible connection between the figure of the religious believer who displays a willingness to lose her life in coming to believe in God and generic gamblers' prodigality, even their refusal to hoard money. Lears writes: "The gambler's attraction to loss, even to self-destruction, was part of the aura of danger that made gambling sublime. But there was more than a titillating frisson at work in gambling's appeal: the figure of 'the loser' became an oddly powerful specter in a society that deified winning and denied defeat. Incurably prodigal, the gambler refused to hoard money; instead he kept 'throwing it away,' seeking a kind of grace through what the theologian Paul Tillich called 'holy waste.' As Tillich said, 'Without the abundance of the heart nothing great can happen'—without 'accepting the waste of an *uncalculated surrender*' or 'wasting ourselves beyond the limits of law and rationality' [*The New Being*, New York 1955, p. 47]" (270, emphasis mine). While noting this comparison, I would like to stipulate that there is a tension between Pascal's approach to living as a Christian, a path he paves with rationalistic *calculation* of probabilities, and Tillich's description, which Lears relays, of the willingness to move beyond rationality in renouncing oneself.

continuing play against the promise of receiving two and then three additional lives for choosing belief in God. The oddity and even incongruity of these quantifications (heaven in its eternity and infinity reduced, even heuristically, to two or three extra lives?) raises a core difficulty with game theory, calling into question the helpfulness of utilities on the basis of the subjectivity of their determination. (Pascal did not distinguish between objective and subjective values, however.) A further objection might stem from the nature of experiences or situations, which seem inherently qualitative and unfit to lend themselves to being captured numerically. Nevertheless, thinking of gaining two or three lives serves an important purpose in illustrating Pascal's strategy. It is a bridge to his attribution of "an infinity of infinitely happy life" to eternity, its own sort of double infinity. Given a probability of fifty percent of winning, it is logically *permissible* for a person to risk his one life in order to gain two lives. (Someone who is risk-averse could sensibly choose to refrain from that bet.) Increase the rewards, however, and what rationality dictates changes. If there remains an equivalent chance of winning and losing, Pascal's strategy reveals that it becomes *il*logical *not* to risk one life in order to win *three*. Proving this serves as a way to convince the libertine what to do when there is an infinity of life at stake. If happiness awaits a person who hazards on this scale, one life for three, how much more so given that "there is an eternity of life and happiness." After some maneuvering around further considerations (revolving around finite and infinite chances of winning), he concludes summarily, "[t]hus our argument carries infinite weight, when the stakes are finite in a game where there are even chances of winning and losing and an infinite prize to be won."

(6) Securing Certainty, or How Rationalized Risk Can Become Decided Fate

> *Yes, sometimes the wildest thought, the seemingly most impossible thought, gets so firmly settled in your head that you finally take it for something feasible … Moreover, if the idea is combined with a strong, passionate desire, you might one day take it, finally, for something fatal, inevitable, predestined, for something that can no longer not be and*

not happen! Maybe there's also something else, some combination of presentiments, some extraordinary effort or will, a self-intoxication by your own fantasy, or whatever else—I don't know; but on that evening (which I will never forget as long as I live) a miraculous event took place. Though it is perfectly justified arithmetically, nonetheless for me it is still miraculous. And why, why did this certainty lodge itself so deeply and firmly in me then, and now so long ago? I surely must have thought of it, I repeat to you, not as an event that might happen among others (and therefore also might not happen), but as something that simply could not fail to happen! –Dostoevsky

Decision and uncertainty are the two aspects that make a gamble a gamble. Life is precisely such a game insofar as it routinely, even essentially, involves the translation of risk into action (Thirouin, 159). This may seem like a banal point. Nevertheless, it is affirmed in various literary and philosophical studies on risk as well as in the secondary scholarship on Pascal. David Jenkins, writing as the Bishop of Durham, claims "risk is of the essence of the whole operation" of doing theology (5), whereas Tanner, addressing gambling with respect to the modern climate of economic risk, writes:

> It is unlikely, however, in today's economy that the primary point of gambling is to contest any of these things—labor discipline; the need for hard work to get ahead; the patience required for slow-paced economic advancement through methodical, monotonous routine—or the premium placed on production of real goods and services, which lies behind them all. … Rather than holding out an alternative to the way things usually work, and therefore some hope of escape from it, *gambling becomes simply a metaphor for everyday life*. (241, emphasis mine)

To the narrator of Ralph Ellison's novel *Invisible Man*, life does not involve risk as much as certain defeat. Contrasting chance from control, he proclaims, "[i]t's 'winner takes nothing' that is the great truth of our country or of any country. Life is to be lived, not controlled, and humanity is won by continuing to play in the face of certain defeat" (577, quoted in Lears, 318-319). According to Heidegger, living amidst venture is distinctively human to the extent that human beings are "beings-thrown." "Being lets beings loose into the daring venture. This release, flinging them loose, is the real daring. … Being is venture pure and simple. It ventures us, us humans. … The Being of beings is the venture" (*Poetry, Language, Thought*, 99). Pascal himself maintains the risk of religion and the totality of uncertainty in life, writing, "[i]f we must never take any chances we ought not do anything for religion, for it is not certain. But how many chances we do take: sea

voyages, battles. Therefore, I say, we should have to do nothing at all, for nothing is certain. And there is more certainty in religion than that we shall live to see tomorrow" (§577). Additionally, in "Wagering and the Evidence," Thomas V. Morris's contribution to a volume on Pascal's *pari* argument, the thoroughgoing insecurity we face in our life-projects is clearly but succinctly presented.

> Life is risk. Nothing we do that is of any importance carries with it a guarantee of success. Nothing we can do is absolutely sure to secure even our own personal safety or well-being from one hour to the next. Yet, we are constantly faced with choices. Lots of decisions; no guarantees. (47)

Morris continues in this introductory passage by pointing out our tendency not to detect the risk that is so pervasive in our lives. "[W]e are used to the risk. We are accustomed to living without many true certainties, to the extent that we ordinarily forget that life is risk" (ibid.). On account of its extent, insecurity is like a curtain, forming the invisible background of our human experience. We see it when we seek to see it with care, otherwise we ignore it. Pascal is an author who does not allow us to ignore it.

I will address in this sixth section the reversal that occurs from one end of the wager argument to the other with respect to certainty—as action-generating assurance on the decision-maker's part replaces the almost paralyzing fear of risk, which had ruled in him before. In doing so, I will first devote attention to the idea of risk generally, outside of Pascal's text. After providing a reading of a passage from Heidegger's "What Are Poets For?" on the ideas of risk and being "thrown"—the image of thrown-ness relating in marvelous ways to the whirling of roulette wheels and the colloquialism for a "spinning mind"[128]—I will turn to the source of certainty for Pascal. What

---

[128] I have found a confluence between the existential riskiness and contingency of being thrown in Heidegger's sense and the metaphor for experiencing chaotic life situations—such as literal gambling—as "spinning out of control." Lears, for one, points to this in quoting the early twentieth-century literary critic William Rose Benét. "'We [Americans] regard life as a faro layout. We have roulette wheels spinning in our brains, and anything is likely to turn up'" (243). Dostoevsky's short novel *The Gambler* leads to more sustained thought about how a person's life can be sent whirling *like* a roulette wheel (and *because* of a roulette wheel). Consider, for example, the passage: "I'm sitting in this dreary little town (oh, how dreary little German towns are!), and instead of thinking over the next step, I live under the influence of feelings just past, under the influence of fresh memories, under the influence of all this recent whirl, which drew me into the

philosophically and theologically enables him to refute uncertainty and conflate *fides* with confidence? How does he reach this declaration about faith, which he makes in the conclusion of his address, "at every step you take along this road you will see that your gain is so certain and your risk so negligible that in the end you will realize that you have wagered on something certain and infinite for which you have paid nothing"? For, in this statement he not only conveys his own attitude of assurance but makes a promise of certainty to the burgeoning believer. The wager, once defined by risk, proves at the end to be as decided and settled a thing as fate—or, for Pascal, faith.

It is worth entering a general discussion on risk by way of definition. Thus far, I have been using the terms "risk," "uncertainty," and "insecurity" somewhat synonymously. Along with the word "chance," they do share a register of meaning, yet it is still instructive to consider the difference of their linguistic roots. The vocabulary of "risk" (*rizikon*, *risicum*, *le risque*, and *das Risiko* in Greek, Latin, French, and German respectively) emerged in a commercial context. It was used to refer to the possibility of damage or loss of merchandise. More broadly, it carries the sense of any hazardous action or dangerous venture.

An understanding of "uncertainty" comes from the negation of the adjective "certain," which derives from the Latin *certus*. What is *certus* is determined, settled, sure: *decided*. The relationship between certainty and decision, while unclear experientially

turbulence then, and threw me out of it again somewhere. It still seems to me at times that I'm spinning in the same whirl, and that the storm is about to rush upon me, snatch me up with its wing in passing, and I will again break out of all order and sense of measure and spin, spin, spin …" (277). And: "My life was breaking in two, but since the previous day I had become accustomed to staking all I had. Maybe it was really true that the money was too much for me and got me into a whirl" (307). These associations are only sweetened by Pascal's own scientific work on the roulette *curve*, which Mesnard reports. "Towards the middle of 1658, in rather curious circumstances, Pascal became once again rather more directly involved with science. … One evening Pascal had gone to bed with a raging toothache. To forget his pain, he set himself to reflect on a difficult problem not completely solved even to-day, that of the curve then called in France the 'roulette' and later more generally known as the cycloid. It is a curve traced by a point on the radius of a circle within, on, or outside its circumference, as the circle rolls along a straight line. By dint of concentrated reflection, Pascal solved his problem and also cured his toothache" (114).

(we make plenty of uncertain decisions), is clear etymologically, given that *certus* is the past participle of *cernere*, the infinitive commonly rendered "to decide."

"Insecurity," another word connoting danger, may be thought of as a double negative, "in" being attached as a negating prefix to "security," which itself stems from the Latin *securus*, "*without* care." To be secure is to be safe, without care or concern for danger; a secure person or thing is protected, even "bound" in the sense of being (whether comfortably or firmly) hemmed in or wrapped up. Lovingly held in a person's arms, a baby may be described as secure, but a crime scene may be spoken of in the same way, hence the order, "secure the perimeter!" Insecurity involves the drive to care for and attend to one's vulnerabilities.

The etymology of "chance" is a gift to philosophy, suffused as it is with the idea of motion, specifically that of falling. A literal translation of the root word of chance, *cadentia*, is "the falling out or happening of events."[129,130] This is seen, too, in the German synonym for accident and chance, *Zufall*. The association with falling not only recalls the representation of chance in the rolling, tossing, and throwing of dice. It also relates to the accidental nature of happiness, to which the phrase "happy-go-lucky" points. That people often find the attainment of happiness to be chancy and unpredictable is further borne by the cognates of *happiness* and *happenstance*, and in the equivocality of the German word *Glück*, which may be translated either as "happiness" or "luck" (Lears, 38).[131] In sum, among the traits and conditions implied by the definitions of "risk,"

---

[129] *Cadentia* is a late Latin form that comes from *cadere*, "to fall."

[130] Like the personification of fortune as Lady Luck, chance is feminine in French and German: *la chance* and *die Chance*. It is curious that the French word *risque* underwent a change in gender, switching from a feminine to a masculine noun between 1578 and 1633 (OED).

[131] Linking happiness to gambling and salvation, Tanner writes: "According to him [Pascal], the uncertainty of happiness in this life is behind the penchant to gamble: because happiness is a bad bet, one tries to gamble one's cares away. The better response to the odds against happiness, Pascal suggests, is the gamble of faith—more precisely, the gamble of the conduct appropriate to faith—for the chance of salvation or lasting happiness" (228). In making his argument in this way, Pascal appeals to the libertine's self-interest.

"uncertainty," "insecurity," and "chance" are—along with the senses of danger and potential loss—the states of being unsettled, in motion, and out of control.

Historically, besides Pascal, the philosophy of risk has found discussants in the figures of William James and Martin Heidegger. Heidegger in his later thought wrote a thorough meditation on the noun *die Wage* (now spelled *Waage*), the German word for the balancing apparatus and a cognate of the English term "wager." At length, he writes:

> As ventured, those who are not protected are nevertheless not abandoned. If they were, they would be just as little ventured as if they were protected. Surrendered only to annihilation, they would no longer hang in the balance. In the Middle Ages the word for balance, *die Wage*, still means about as much as hazard or risk [*Gefahr*]. This is the situation in which matters may turn out one way or the other. That is why the apparatus which moves by tipping one way or the other is called *die Wage*. It plays and balances out [*Sie spielt und spielt sich ein*]. The word *Wage*, in the sense of risk and as name of the apparatus, comes from *wägen*, *wegen*, to make a way, that is, to go, to be in motion. *Be-wägen* means to cause to be on the way [*auf den Weg*] and so to bring into motion: to shake or rock, *wiegen*. What rocks is said to do so because it is able to bring the balance, *Wage*, into the play of movement [*ins Spiel der Bewegung zu bringen*], this way or that. What rocks the balance weighs down; it has weight. To weigh or throw in the balance, as in the sense of wager, means to bring into the movement of the game [*in den Gang des Spieles bringen*], to throw into the scales, to release into risk. What is so ventured [*das Gewagte*] is, of course, unprotected; but because it hangs [*liegt*] in the balance, it is retained in the venture. It is upheld. Its ground keeps it safely within it. What is ventured, as something that is, is something that is willed; retained within the will, it itself remains in the mode of will, and ventures itself [*und wagt sich*]. What is ventured is thus careless [*sorg-los*], *sine cura*, *securum*—secure, safe [*sicher*]. What is ventured can follow the venture, follow it into the unprotectedness of the ventured, only if it rests securely in the venture. The unprotectedness of what is ventured not only does not exclude, it necessarily includes, its being secure in its ground. What is ventured goes along with the venture [*Das Gewagte geht mit dem Wagnis mit*]. (100-101)

This passage, with its own concluding turn to security, appears in Heidegger's essay "What Are Poets For?" It offers the continuation of a discussion of the idea of being ventured, which emerges from a reading of Rainer Maria Rilke's poem "improvised verses." In the paragraph preceding the one cited here, Heidegger (again, following Rilke) contrasts being ventured with the state of being shielded. Being shielded is *being dear*.[132] To be ventured, though, is to be released into risk, thrown in the balance.

---

[132] "Nature ventures living beings, and 'grants none special cover.' Likewise, we men who have been ventured are 'no dearer' to the daring that ventures us. … To dare is to risk the game. …

Importantly, this differs from being abandoned or annihilated. Being ventured, therefore, is a neither/nor occurrence: "being thrown in the balance" is itself balanced between the protection of being shielded and the annihilation of abandonment. This is curious because a set of scales, like a seesaw in a playground, could serve as a representation of the notion of dichotomy. Either a side is up or it is weighed down. The possibility of equilibrium presents itself, however, as a third option: a level state of rest in which neither side moves.

Movement, though, at least in Heidegger's analysis, seems to be the point. To hang (or lie) in the balance as a ventured thing is to be *on the way*. It is to be in the process of tipping, about to fall or rise. Only plants and animals repose securely as they are in the balance (132). Whether or not we can hear an echo of Pascal's "you are embarked" in it,[133] this text's phrase "on the way" (*auf den Weg*) is significant to my investigation because of the link it has to play. For Heidegger, play provides an expression for the movement of balancing out, as evinced in the statements "[i]t plays and balances out" ([*s*]*ie spielt und spielt sich ein*) and "[t]o weigh or throw in the balance, as in the sense of wager, means to bring into the movement of the game" (*Wagen heißt: in den Gang des Spieles bringen*). While he does not analyze *Spiel* ("game," "gamble," or "play") to support his view, he does provide evidence for the etymological relation between *Wage* and the infinitives *wegen*, *wiegen*, and *Be-wägen* (related to *Bewegung*). The closeness of these terms reflects the role of motion in the function of scales. Balancing apparatuses (*Wage*) are made in such a way as to respond to the *weight* of what is placed

---

What is shielded is entrusted to the protector, the shielder. Our older and richer language would have used words like *verlaubt*, *verlobt*—held dear" (100).

[133] Or, in a different context, one might recall Franz Rosenzweig's description in *The Star of Redemption* of Christians as always on the way.

upon them by moving (*wegen*), that is, by "rocking" or "shaking" (*wiegen*).[134] This is also why with wagers you speak of weighing your options.

Movement away from equilibrium into a decisive position is Pascal's aim in the wager argument, too—at the start, he presents his interlocutor as stuck between the equally weighted possibilities of God existing or not. In one sense (the literal one), decision—any decision—brings about certainty simply by settling an unsure matter (again, because the Latin root *certus* signifies "decided"). At some point it is necessary to turn to passions, practice, and the will to interrupt the ruminating of reason, which could go on endlessly taking things into account.[135] There is another sense at work, though. For, *which* decision the libertine makes is of utmost importance to Pascal. He in no way would want to say that it is possible for the libertine to arrive at a peaceful state by deciding against God. Rather, in the course of reasoning with him, Pascal is dedicated to incline him in a particular direction—toward faith. It is this move that I am analyzing here as a "tip" from risk to certainty.

To Davidson's identification of the quest for certainty as one of the main themes in Pascal's thought (34), I add the contention that Pascal finds certainty in two sources: the Bible and mathematical logic. He has a biblical warrant for assimilating faith and certainty in Hebrews 11:1, "[n]ow faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." And, indeed, he displays such a use of "faith" at the beginning of "*Infini rien*" when he writes "*by faith we know* [God's] existence, through glory we shall know his nature" (emphasis mine). Despite his statement in §577 that

---

[134] The English verb "weigh" is related to the Old High German *wegan* and the Middle High German *wegen* (to move, shake, weigh), as well as the modern German transitive and intransitive verbs *wägen* and *wiegen* (to weigh and to be of a certain weight). By virtue of its Germanic root, "weigh" is linked to a range of words, including "way," "wagon," and even—with their connection to the notion of "pledge"—the terms "wed," "wage(s)," and "wager" (OED).

[135] This is evident in the conclusion of fragment §821, which reads: "Reason works slowly, looking so often at so many principles, which must always be present, that it is constantly nodding or straying because all its principles are not present. Feeling does not work like that, but works instantly, and is always ready. We must then put our faith in feeling, or it will always be vacillating."

religion is not certain, in §131 he attributes certainty to faith with respect to human beings' purposeful creation and our awareness of our conscious—and not dreaming—state.

Apart from theological grounds of assurance, there is comfort in the logic of the numerical analysis in the wager, quantification serving as a possible mechanism of control. As several critics and scholars maintain, Pascal's logic throughout the Wager is sound. This is not insignificant, but it is not the whole story. The argument works with the probabilities he assigns—his conclusion follows from his premises—but the probabilities themselves are highly questionable.

The large role that Pascal affords to reason in his argument is significant because, in proceeding with his discussion of gambling probabilistically, Pascal is calling the libertine to make a *calculated* surrender. Note how distinct Pascal's use of wagering is from the association of (some forms of) ordinary gambling with unthinking spontaneity, wasteful squandering, and an ir-/anti-rational refusal of systematic analysis. While Pascal points to chance, he does not celebrate it or surrender himself to it. He controls it by measuring it. This quantification, with a sense of God's grace, leads to certainty. If Pascal did not retain a strong sense of God's grace, he would be apt to fall into the category of "evangelical rationalists," which Lears describes.

The dichotomy between cultures of chance and cultures of control is one Lears raises in his chapter "Confidence Games." He points to the growing emphasis among nineteenth-century American Christians on the role of human will in choosing God over the unpredictability of God's grace in electing them. It is in this context that Lears writes of the move to assimilate the mysteries of grace to "evangelical rationality" (135). Although the role of God's grace is not diminished in Pascal's thought, his approach—with its heavy reliance on reason—betrays an affinity much more with the side of those seeking control than the (often creative) people inclined towards celebrations of chance.

In part because of his use of reason, then, he reaches certainty in the end. And, on the same basis, the Pascalian bettor never loses control in playing.

In §418, gambling paradoxically provides security for the libertine whose happiness otherwise rests on precarious grounds. In being ventured, that is, in venturing himself, he comes to experience safety in God—a religious parallel to Heidegger's claim at the end of the passage that I cited from "What Are Poets For?" There is a spinning out of control but it turns out that there is also a special form of control induced by radical spinning. Thus, we may be confident that wagering is the way forward—it is the *Weg*, the path of extreme movement, the sure *Spiel*. As Pascal sets it out, the road to salvation goes through play.

III. CONCLUSION

To recapitulate the findings from the previous six sections on contrasting and contradictory elements of Pascal's gambling-based Christian apology in *Pensées* §418, we may say that Pascal issues a call for *divertissement*-loving libertines to a radical form of play. The object of this gamble is nothing other than deciding one's self and one's future. This is (1) a free decision that emerges from a paradoxically forced play situation. This is (2) a rational decision that is made by going beyond reason. This is (3) a "timely" decision that affects one's community, one's course of life, and one's eternal lot. This is (4) a decision that derives from the interplay of reason and the passions. Because it stems not only from the mind but also from the heart, it has bodily consequences—it is enacted physically in religious customs. This is (5) a costly-yet-prudential decision. One stands to gain so much from making it that the stakes are reduced in the end to seemingly infinitesimal proportions. In this manner, gambling on God reveals its relation to grace. As Lears so convincingly presents in his study, gambling, like gifts and grace, operates on the principle of receiving something in exchange for nothing. Lastly, this is (6) a

decision that melds the radical movement of risk with the peaceful assurance of certainty. Reading Pascal on this subject in conjunction with Søren Kierkegaard provides the view of play as a mechanism for bringing about maturity rather than seeing play as a symbol merely of childhood. Together, Pascal and Kierkegaard bring us to a brink of decision and commitment, leaving the content of our choice in our hands. It's either infinity or nothing.

Thousands of years before Pascal almost died crossing the Seine, there was a myth about another life-deciding crossing, the crossing of the River of Forgetfulness. Plato relayed it at the end of the *Republic* (Partenie, "Plato's Myths"). The famous Armenian myth of Er is framed as a story of a hero who dies in battle but comes back to life to report what he found in the afterlife. As part of his narrative, Er tells of Lachesis, the daughter of Necessity. Lachesis instructs mortals that they are to choose their lives from a wide assortment of possible conditions before they are born into a new cycle of existence. The order in which they choose is determined by lot, but the mortals are responsible for their decisions. Some are hasty in selecting their selves and statuses, swayed by vanity and pleasures. Others are reactive, not wanting certain forms of life based on past experiences. Those who choose well and with care are imbued with the virtue that is available freely and plentifully. Once they have all chosen, but before they are collectively reborn, the souls are obliged to drink from the river of unmindfulness. This brings about deep forgetfulness, except on the part of Er, who neither had to choose a soul nor partake of the special water. Thus, the concluding page of the *Republic* reads:

> And so, Glaucon, his story wasn't lost but preserved, and it would save us, if we were persuaded by it, for we would then make a good crossing of the River of Forgetfulness, and our souls wouldn't be defiled. But if we are persuaded by me, we'll believe that the soul is immortal and able to endure every evil and every good, and we'll always hold to the upward path, practicing justice with reason in every way. That way we'll be friends both to ourselves and to the gods while we remain here on earth and afterwards—like victors in the games who go around collecting their prizes—we'll receive our rewards. Hence, both in this life and on the thousand-year journey we've described, we'll do well and be happy. (10.621b-d)

It is to Plato's treatment of play in his last dialogue, the *Laws*, that we will turn in the next chapter.

PART III. RELIGIOUS PLAY

Chapter 4

Strange Puppets: The Lowliness of Divine Playthings in Plato's *Laws*

Several scholars have addressed the theme of play in Plato's writings under various guises. After contributions concerning play's relation to seriousness (Emmanuelle Jouët-Pastré); sovereignty (Aikaterini Lefka); power (Mihai Spariosu); freedom (Christopher Bobonich, André Laks); and, of course, education (R.G. Bury, John Cleary, Werner Jaeger, Arthur Krentz), I would like to attempt a study of play that concentrates on in its relation to lowliness (or *tapeinôtes* in ancient Greek), focusing on the image of living beings as divine puppets, which Plato supplies in Books I and VII of his *Laws*.[136] Because of the strange playfulness of the image, to speak of *tapeinôtes* entails a discussion of serious worth, too. For, in short, Plato simultaneously lowers and lifts us by imagining human beings as stringed toys of god.[137,138] He ridicules us, giving us a reason to think that we have a relatively low standing in the universe. And yet he also allows us to see ourselves as deserving of a relatively high position in the universe. We

---

[136] As in English, the Greek term for "lowliness," *tapeinôtes*, can refer to lowness of place and lowness of stature. Liddell and Scott list "brought down" and "humbled" as possible translations for the adjective *tapeinos*. To temper possible Christian overtones of "humility"—which is presumably less Christian-sounding than "meekness"—I will alternate between referring to "lowliness" as "humility" and "modesty." An additional point may offer further clarification. Although the idea of lowliness runs counter to the idea of pride, *tapeinôtes* does not seem to be the precise antonym for *hybris* linguistically. For, the arrogance of *hybris* is conveyed as riotousness more than exaltedness. *Hybris* calls to mind an excessiveness that is opposed to "moderation," *sophrosynê*. Lastly, I should raise the issue of considering humility and pride on the part of human beings *relative to god*. One of the points that I will raise in this chapter is the impossibility of divine pride. In a related manner, the potential failure on the part of human beings is to see ourselves as too much like god. This relates tangentially to Kierkegaard's interest in assumed immortality at the stage of Religiousness *A*.

[137] To reiterate, I will use "god" in the singular, lower-case form for the most part in the discussion of Plato and play, as a way of accommodating the different views of the divine in Plato's corpus.

[138] This raising *and* lowering recalls the moderate view of human nature, which Pascal holds. "*Il est dangereux de trop faire voir à l'homme combien il est égal aux bêtes, sans lui montrer sa grandeur. Et il est encore dangereux de lui trop faire voir sa grandeur sans sa bassesse. Il est encore plus dangereux de lui laisser ignorer l'un et l'autre, mais il est très avantageux de lui représenter l'un et l'autre*" (*Pensées*, §153).

may be artifacts of god, but at least god finds it worthwhile to play with us.[139] Plato's up-and-down movement mirrors the actions of a puppeteer. It also accords closely with other philosophers' understandings of play as something (intrinsically, unendingly) oscillatory.[140]

In what follows, I will give close readings of three passages from the *Laws* (715e-716d, 644d-645c, and 803a-804c), which address human nature and the intersection of play, virtue, happiness, and education. Besides seeking to demonstrate how they contain this joint element of humble-highness, in analyzing the selected texts I will argue that three levels of play are at work/in play in them: the divine, human, and Platonic.

First, we see god as a player and legislator, the possessor of toys who provides the condition for the game of life by setting rules (standards, limitations) for right living. While Plato is reluctant to set forward much by way of positive detail concerning the playful nature of god—for example, he states that it is impossible to *know* whether god made us as playthings or for a serious purpose—he is clear that god is the measure of all things, beginning, middle, and end. God is the standard bearer, and we live well when we follow god. Plato shows that the proper response on the part of human beings to our identity as divine puppets is to play along; too much seriousness on our parts toward ourselves or even toward the best, most important things in our human realm is not

---

[139] I am grateful to Katja Vogt for supplying this point, and for her comments on an earlier version of this chapter.

[140] Thus, Gadamer writes: "If we examine how the word 'play' is used and concentrate on its so-called metaphorical senses, we find talk of the play of light, the play of the waves, the play of gears or parts of machinery, the interplay of limbs, the play of forces, the play of gnats, even a play on words. In each case what is intended is to-and-fro movement that is not tied to any goal that would bring it to an end. Correlatively, the word 'Spiel' originally meant 'dance,' and is still found in many word forms (e.g., in Spielmann, jongleur). The movement of playing has no goal that brings it to an end; rather, it renews itself in constant repetition. The movement backward and forward is obviously so central to the definition of play that it makes no difference who or what performs this movement. The movement of play as such has, at it were, no substrate. It is the game that is played—it is irrelevant whether or not there is a subject who plays it. The play is the occurrence of the movement as such. Thus we speak of the play of colors and do not mean only that one color plays against another, but that there is one process or sight displaying a changing variety of colors" (*Truth and Method*, 104).

befitting our toy nature. Unexpectedly, though, we are allowed to treat the serious things of religion as play. This is a strange mixing. Bewildering, it invites careful but not too earnest reflection.

Play is enacted on what I am calling the second, human level in specifically recommended and prescribed forms, which may themselves be subclassified. On the one hand, human beings respond to the divine players by singing, dancing, and sacrificing in measured, rule-bound ways—because we are limited. This is our joyful humbling. On the other hand, we also engage in the play of education and legislation—because we are free. And this is our sober elevation. Whereas joyful humbling accompanies our participation in activities oriented toward god, sober elevation marks our human-directed play. This difference may be expressed as playing *with* and playing *like*.

Human beings play *with* god, observing our limits, obeying god's rules, and passing time with god—spending our pastime—in religious rituals.[141] In doing so, we try to "win" prizes from god, like god's favor during war. We need god's help to attain victory in all sorts of battles, yet we must remember the directionality of play. We may make choices that are in line with divine justice, and this is to our great benefit, but it strongly behooves us to keep in view our inability to sway or manipulate god's ways. Mindful of our measure, we play with god under strict constraints.

We discover our own elevation and the grandness of our freedom, however, when we imitate god. For, we play *like* god when we lay down political rules for our cities. This must be undertaken with soberness and care. Education (*paideia*) is another form of our play (*paidia*), which strengthens the best in us, guiding us as we engage in

---

[141] In some languages and schools of thought, the words and ideas of *pastime*, *leisure*, and *play* are synonymous or deeply related, even if distinguishable. Thus, in their standard *Greek-English Lexicon*, Liddell and Scott offer "pastime" in addition to "game" and "childish play" as possible definitions for *paidia*. *Scholê*, from which the English words "school" and "scholastic" derive, indicates leisure, spare time, rest, and ease.

the noblest competition—the (self-agonistic?) contest for virtue. In this educational and moral dimension, play is treated as highly purposive, even dutiful.

Thirdly, I would like to suggest that there is a level at which Plato is at play with us, his readers, in the dialogue, in the form his philosophy takes and in his choice of words. Beyond word games, Plato engages in fanciful feats of myth-telling and imagination, which typically count as instances of play. To illustrate the height of human dignity and freedom, Plato uses an image that I find is hard to take seriously: a divine puppet.[142] Could there be a seemingly less-fitting figure to convey autonomy than a marionette? Is Plato being deliberately ridiculous in taking such a counterintuitive approach? In supplying this particular image, is Plato merely pulling our strings—and (how) should we play back? Given that the first level of divine play had implications for second level human players—keeping a strict player/toy boundary in tact: while we might be called to play with god, god never becomes our toy—I wonder whether Plato's third level of play encourages or more strongly calls for a particularly playful response from us as readers. Does it beckon us to imitate him? Are we allowed to make sport of him in return, and what would that mean? At the very least, Plato's playful philosophy seems to merit a "fitting" interpretation, that is, our refusal to read with a straight tone what he sets forth slanted.

I. INTRODUCING THE *LAWS*

Before turning to the above-mentioned "measure" passage (715e-716d) and the two marionette texts (644d-645c and 803a-804c), I would like to offer a few introductory

---

[142] I find the image of the puppet to be suggestive of play, but there are at least two reasons to treat it seriously. One is that the image may cause us to think of human beings as artifacts made by the gods. A second, related point concerns the reasons human beings would be created by the gods. Would it not be demeaning in Plato's eyes to regard god as in need of entertainment? Presumably, a self-sufficient god would not have to have or treat the world as a toy. Again, I thank Professor Vogt for challenging my initial way of reading the text.

remarks on the *Laws*, particularly concerning the connection between play and education.[143]

The *Laws*, Plato's longest and last dialogue, is marked as strange (*atopos*) in a number of respects, not least of all by Socrates' absence in it. Rather than by Socrates, the role of the leading locutor is inhabited by the "Athenian Stranger," who sets out on a conversation with Cleinias (a Cretan) and Megillus (a Spartan) about legislation and the founding of a *utopian* city ("Magnesia").[144] The exchange takes place outside of Athens, where most of the other dialogues occur and from where Plato himself comes (hence the Athenian's foreign or "strange" status in the work). That it is a religious conversation is indicated by its beginning, setting, and content. Plato introduces the religious framework by opening the dialogue with the word *theos*. He secures the religious framework on the other end by making Zeus' temple the destination toward which the three older men journey. Along their course, the (semi-)divine origin of the laws is stressed. Theological discussions receive specific treatment in Book X. In addition to a defense for the existence of the gods, that book offers the two claims (and mandated beliefs for citizens) that the gods care for the world and are impervious to persuasion through prayer. A further point of religious interest is the stipulation in Book VII that village temples should serve as the sites where children "congregate" and "assemble" to play (794a), turning holy ground into playgrounds.

---

[143] In addition to such regularly recognized treatments of the *Laws* as Glenn Morrow's *Plato's Cretan City* (1960) and R.F. Stalley's *Introduction to Plato's Laws* (1983), more recent attention to the dialogue includes Christopher Bobonich's book *Utopia Recast* (2002), the sixth symposium of the International Plato Society, which was dedicated to the dialogue in 2001, as well as *Plato's "Laws": A Critical Guide* (2010, edited by Bobonich), *Plato's* Laws*: Force and Truth in Politics* (2013, edited by Gregory Recco and Eric Sanday), and Mark Lutz's *Divine Law and Political Philosophy in Plato's* Laws (2012).

[144] There is an etymological link underlying the ideas of strangeness and an ideally perfect but imaginary land. Whereas *a-topos* ("unusual," "strange") literally means "out of place," *utopia* comes from the phrase *ou topos*, meaning "not a place." If "utopia" is taken (even incorrectly) to derive from *eu-topos*, it would simply signify "good place."

A side point of interest for this chapter is the difference between the *Republic* and the *Laws* with respect to psychic and civic partition. In the *Republic*, justice comes about when the function principle is followed, that is, when each of the three parts of the soul (reason, spirit, and appetite) and each of the three classes of the city (the philosophers, warriors, and artisans) does its own work or minds its own business. In the *Laws*, such tripartite division is missing. As we will see, it has been replaced by bipartition instead: the rational and everything else.[145] My question is whether one can recognize a shift from an emphasis on work in the *Republic* to an interest in play in the *Laws* as correlative to a shift from the threefold to the twofold. If there is a link between bipartite division and play, could play then be understood as supplying itself as some third, mediating thing?

An investigation into a work-tripartition link and a play-bipartition link, as I conceive it, would also involve consideration of unique callings. That is, Plato argues for specific vocations based on specific natures and classes in the *Republic*. In the view proffered there, a person in whom reason rules is not meant to work as a soldier or a cobbler. That much is clear. How could there be specific play callings within a bipartite scheme, though? Is there a type of play, which, proper to legislators, differs from play for everyone else—namely legislating? In what way does the activity of setting down rules count as play? On a theoretical level, it seems entirely feasible to separate the identity of a "game master" (a person who creates a game) and a player. In addition, the Stranger states in 643b that, from childhood, a person should play at her intended occupation. What within the *Laws*' account of the city and *psychê* would determine the form a child's play (and work) should take? According to the logic of the *Laws*, is there another plane on which bipartition allows for an openness toward play, a freedom for

---

[145] I accept that bipartition is characteristic of the *Laws*, however it is a matter in dispute. Along with Helen North (*Sophrosyne*, 187), D.A. Rees recognizes a twofold division ("Bipartition of the Soul in the Early Academy"), whereas T.J. Saunders upholds a tripartite view in his article "The Structure of the Soul and the State in Plato's *Laws*."

the rational and the irrational to play the same games—namely the religious games of offering sacrifices? Or is an irrational person impious, and therefore a bad player in the games of religion? These are a few questions that an inquiry into a "play principle" in the *Laws* might involve. Seeking to answer them could also serve to illuminate the nature of coordination and the means of its achievement. How would a play principle differ from the function principle in bringing about harmony between parts? For, regardless of the number of parts, Plato's goal of harmony is continuous across the two dialogues.

The word *pais* (child) leads naturally to *paidia* (play), which easily expands to *paideia* (upbringing or education). It is not difficult to see the relation between these terms or how their ideas develop, building on each other. I would like to suggest that the connection between the ideas of childhood and play find an additional expression through the word for pedagogy, which combines *pai* and *agôgê*. *Agôgê* ("training," "education," "force," "a carrying away") is a fascinating term on account of its closeness to the word *agôn*. *Agôn* signifies both a gathering and a contest for a prize at the games. (Therefore, a "synagogue" is a place where people gather together but "agonistic" implies competition.) The teaching of children is a *leading* not unrelated to contests and the assemblies of religious and legislative bodies. We might get carried away with passions but education trains us to follow the right leadings. Tether ropes—or puppet strings—begin to suggest themselves as pertinent images.

Plato writes of play in a way that differs from, or contests, definitions that have found rather broad acceptance today. When Plato treats play as something that is deliberately and dutifully sought for its utility, on the one hand, and as something that encompasses the whole of life, on the other, he counters a range of modern thinkers whether in sociology, psychology, or theology, who theorize play as an end in itself, which is expressed in times and places separated from ordinary life. These thinkers might acknowledge the potential rewards of play, but they insist on the secondary status

of the benefits as unintended "by-products." Play, as Plato conceives it in the *Laws*,

however, is a worthwhile activity when it is approached as an instrument serving noble

ends—a tool for cultivating virtue (in the case of children) or exercising rationality in

legislating and piety in offering sacrifices (in the case of adults).[146] It is linked both to

work and to seriousness.[147]

The relationship between play and seriousness (*spoudê*) in Plato's thought is not

straightforward—perhaps it shifts—and so scholars in their various interpretations

capture the two ideas in different moments of their interplay. In one estimation, which

uplifts a statement from Plato's *Sixth Letter*, play and seriousness are essentially

linked.[148] Representative of this position is Gavin Ardley, who writes of a "conjunction

even to the point of assimilation" (226) and states quite strongly that Plato "waged a life-

long war against the dichotomy" between play and seriousness (231).[149] Seth Benardete

takes another approach. The analysis he offers of the oscillation of the Stranger's

speeches in the *Laws* makes clear that Benardete retains a dichotomous view of the two

---

[146] Freydberg adopts a different perspective and maintains that Plato holds a view of play as intrinsically valuable. Drawing attention to the definition offered in the *Laws* 667e (where the Stranger says "it is precisely this that I call 'play', when it has no particular good or bad effect that deserves serious attention"), Freydberg writes, "[h]ere, play is given simply as gracefulness for its own sake, and as antecedent to the more philosophically serious determinations of play-in-service-to-lawfulness or play-in-service-to-truth" (17). The following chapter in this third, "religious" section of the dissertation will consider play in relation to grace.

[147] The Stranger asserts that leisure neither corresponds nor leads to luxurious laxity. In other words, the playful are not lazy. "Now, do such leisured circumstances leave them no pressing work to do, no genuinely appropriate occupation? … No … we must insist that there is something left to do in a life of leisure, and it's only fair that the task imposed, far from being a light or trivial one, should be the most demanding of all. … To follow this regimen and to get the maximum benefit from it, the whole day and the whole night is scarcely time enough. In view of this, every gentleman must have a timetable prescribing what he is to do every minute of his life, which he should follow at all times from the dawn of one day until the sun comes up at the dawn of the next" (807a-d). In response to such a description, one may ask: Is Plato serious?

[148] "Adopt it [this letter] as a just and binding law and covenant, taking a solemn oath—in gentlemanly earnest, but with the playfulness that is the sister of solemnity—in the name of the divine letter of all things present and to come …" (323c-d).

[149] This interpretation is consonant with the dialectical description in the *Laws* 816e: "Now anyone who means to acquire a discerning judgement will find it impossible to understand the serious side of things in isolation from their ridiculous aspect, or indeed appreciate anything at all except in the light of its opposite."

qualities. Referring to the speech in 803c, he writes of a change in the Stranger's focus and states, "[h]e is [now] concerned only with the beginning. At the beginning is play or *paidia*. His proposal to consecrate play turned play into its contrary. He was compelled to be serious (*spoudazein*) and eliminate play (*paizein*). Now he takes it all back" (207).[150] In his book *The Play of the Platonic Dialogues*, Bernard Freydberg adds another layer to these considerations of the play-seriousness dynamic when he looks at the *Republic* and proposes that "calling imitation 'playful and not serious' can also be heard playfully" (156). Freydberg uses the application of play at this meta-level as a way to praise imitation, rather than denigrate it. Refusing to nail down or settle on a single, firm view, I will accept the indeterminacy of the changing relationship between play and seriousness. Such a tack accords with a broad approach to understanding the definition of "games" amidst their disparate manifestations. Some occurrences of play are undertaken with the concentration warranted by a fierce and dire fight. These could count as much as instances of play as those "frivolous" pursuits among light-hearted people among whom nothing ultimate is at stake.

Instantiations of play in the *Laws* are numerous. The variety of its forms among human beings may be seen in the different types of games proper to children and adults, boys and girls, and the enslaved and free. The play that initially arises among children spontaneously (*autophuês*, by self-nature) becomes strictly governed by external forces, once it is turned over to the stable control of non-changing rules (794a, 797b). In fact, the primary purpose of children's play becomes training in heteronomy (rather than an autotelic—self-motivating and self-pleasing—exercise). Grown men revert to their childish selves in drinking symposia (645e-646a), which the Stranger offers as positive examples of efficient "examination by recreation" (650a); legislation, however, is a sober

---

[150] Benardete's line "At the beginning is *paidia*" offers a striking third alternate to the Gospel statement "In the beginning was the word [*logos*]" (John 1:1) and Freud's quotation of Goethe, "In the beginning was the deed [*Tat*]" at the end of *Totem and Taboo* (200).

game for old men (685a).[151] Girls may acquire the same skills as boys (for example in handling weapons) but the play lessons should be attended separately after the age of six (794c-d). In music, it is shameful to mix tunes and rhythms distinctly suited to men and women, and enslaved and free persons (669c-670d). In the discussion of comedy and tragedy, the Stranger leaves the mimicry of ridiculous buffoonery to "slaves and hired aliens," warning both male and female citizens never to be caught learning it (816e).

While play falls under classifications of age, gender, and civil standing in the *Laws*, it is also categorized under three aspects of *movement*: the physical, vocal, and psychic. Therefore, one finds play in the movement of bodies in gymnastics, hunting, and dancing; in choruses, that is, the movement of singing voices, which may be accompanied by dancing; and in the movement of souls and heavenly bodies. This understanding of play—not only in terms of motion but also *as* motion—is central to later play theories. What is interesting in the more immediate context is the appearance of this idea (of play as motion) in the example of the manipulation of the marionette; jerky movements indicate rigidity, the tyranny of passion, and even perhaps seriousness and constraint.

II. UPHOLDING THE DIVINE STANDARD: A MEASURED RESPONSE

(TEXT: 4.715E-716D)

After reviewing the Cretan and Spartan legal codes in Books I and II, and considering lessons from the history of government in Book III, Plato turns to the construction of the city of Magnesia and the rules governing its way of life in Book IV. There, in a discussion of justice and happiness in which he makes stark religious claims,

---

[151] Feasts of the god "who made us the gift of wine" afford the only occasion for appropriate drunkenness (775b). Much of the scholarship of Mihai Spariosu addressed to the figure and spirit of Dionysus would prove helpful in filling out this angle of play.

he demonstrates the relatively low stature and role belonging to human beings. In this portion of the text, Plato appraises the gods by affirming that they are the measure of all things. Recognizing that ultimate preeminence belongs to the gods and not humanity, he gives them their due reverence. Although this is the second of the three passages directing this chapter, I will begin with it. For, establishing an understanding of its claims will aid in our attempt to clarify Plato's (earlier and later) use of the puppet image in 1.644d-645c and 7.803a-804c.

Plato offers his assessment of how the divine nature should determine human nature and activity in a speech within a speech. Referring to an ancient story, the Stranger suggests what message to give to future colonists upon their arrival in the utopian city. Informing the content of the hypothetical address is the expression from the sophist Protagoras, "Man is the measure of all things."[152]

The lines of 715-716, whatever the complexity or maze of their deliverance, also carry multiple themes, including the themes of moderation and obedience. These may be thought through according to their theological and ethical dimensions. On the theological side, there is the not unparadoxical view of god to explore: in what way is god a being simultaneously all-encompassing in measure and yet moderate? In seeking to provide an answer, we may ask what standards, limits, or rules the divine nature sets. Another piece of a response to the seeming contradiction at the heart of the being of god is an analysis of moderation (*sophrosynê*); how is this virtue theorized in its connection to the traits, ideas, or terms *modesty*, *measure*, *proportion*, and *self-mastery*—but foremost, how is moderation an instantiation of lowliness? Also on the ethical side are the notions of friendly imitation and lowly, or humble, obedience. Raising the question of what it means for (divine) moderation to call for (human) moderation—for like to "follow" like—will lead into a consideration of the consequence(s) of religious sacrifice. Briefly,

---

[152] The formulation in 178b is *pantôn metron anthrôpos estin*. See also *Theaetetus* 152a.

the consequence of god's measure is the play of sacrifice; the consequence of sacrifice,

piously offered, is successful living.[153]

According to the Stranger's counsel, colonists would be greeted in Magnesia

with these words:

> [ATHENIAN:] "Men, according to the ancient story [*ho palaios logos*], there is a god who holds in his hands the beginning and end and middle [*archên te kai teleutên kai mesa*] of all things, and straight he marches in the cycle of nature. Justice, who takes vengeance on those who abandon the divine law, never leaves his side. The man who means to live in happiness latches on to her and follows her with meekness [*tapeinos*] and humility [orderly behavior, *kekosmêmenos*]. But he who bursts with pride, elated by wealth or honours or by physical beauty when young and foolish, whose soul is afire with the arrogant belief that so far from needing someone to control and lead him, he can play the leader to others – there's a man whom God has deserted. … What action, then, should a sensible [*emphrona*] man take, and what should his outlook be? What must he *avoid* doing or thinking?"
> CLEINIAS: This much is obvious: every man must resolve to belong to those who follow in the company of God.
> ATHENIAN: "So what conduct recommends itself to God and reflects his wishes? There is only one sort, epitomized in the old saying 'like approves of like' (excess [*ametra*] apart, which is both its own enemy and that of due proportion [*emmêtrios*]). In our view it is God who is pre-eminently the 'measure [*metron*] of all things', much more so than any 'man', as they say. So if you want to recommend yourself to someone of this character, you must do your level best to make your own character reflect his, and on this principle [*logon*] the moderate man [*ho … sophron*] is God's friend, being like him, whereas the immoderate and

---

[153] Drawing on Plato's *Laws* (by way of Johan Huizinga), Robert Bellah defines play as autotelic and conjectures that religion emerged from mammalian play. In *Religion and Evolution*, Bellah writes of the connection between ritual and play as follows: "So, with Plato, I have returned to the central theme of this chapter—the emergence of religion from mammalian play. I have gone deep into our evolutionary past to discover the origin of parental care and of play many millions of years ago, in the leaping and jumping of 'young things,' as Plato said. Play is so important to me because long before *Homo sapiens*, probably long before primates, play had already emerged in the evolution of mammals as a sphere sheltered to some degree from selectionist pressures, having its end internal to its practice, however much it may have proved adaptive in secondary and tertiary forms. Language and culture have given play the possibility of enormous creative elaboration, and, with the constant help of Johan Huizinga and with the passages in Plato that Huizinga pointed out, I have found ritual and religion emerging from play. Here, too, we find practices whose good, first of all, is internal to the practices, though they may have adaptive or maladaptive consequences as they reflect back on the world of daily life. But if ritual comes from play, many other spheres of life develop out of ritual and its cultural implications. I have tried above to indicate what a complex historical process this has been" (111-112). While he draws on Plato, Bellah inverts Plato's ludic argument. Plato appears to give religion priority, encouraging "living beings" to play at sacrifice and other activities because we belong to a playful god. Bellah by contrast places play at the beginning, attributing the rise of religion to animal practices protected from the pressures of selection. Going forward, it is worth considering what is at stake in arguing that ritual derives from play—rather than in simply associating ritual with play, as another form of inner-teleological activity.

unjust man is not like him and is his enemy; and the same reasoning applies to the other vices too." (715e-716d, original emphasis)

The beginning, end, and middle correspond to the domain of god. The fullness of god's measure is the entirety of the *archê, teleutê,* and *mesê*. Nothing is excluded from "the All" of god's possession. Such a message probably originated as an Orphic proclamation concerning the reach of Zeus (hence the use of the singular here, *ho theos*).[154] Plato's citation of it represents his refutation of the formula stemming from Protagoras that human beings have the measure of life within ourselves. Under the Protagorean view we could rule ourselves—with nothing beside ourselves, who or what would impinge upon us and prevent us from self-governance?—but an acknowledgement of god as the standard-bearer of life sets (potentially severe) limits on human beings, confining us to acts of obedience. This is reflected linguistically in that the word for measure, *metron*, can equally indicate "measuring-rod" or "measuring-line." In holding the ultimate measure of beginning, end, and middle within god's self, god sets the boundaries, lines, and rules for us—making the world (*kosmos*) orderly (*kosmoumena*).

Rules confine. This constricting function is positive, even necessary, for games. By producing order through constraint, keeping chaos at bay, rules provide the condition for the possibility of play. Similarly, observing religious rituals is a form of acknowledging the constraining and external power of god. Freydberg relates divine measure to the human limitation displayed in religious acts of play. In a way that highlights the language of rule, he writes, "[sacrificing, singing, and dancing] involve the introduction of measure, involve giving oneself over to a certain kind of rule. In sacrificing, one clearly *admits one's non-divinity*; the offering of something of value to the

---

[154] It also corresponds nicely with a number of biblical descriptions of God. In the Hebrew Bible, one finds the characterization of God as the first and last in Isaiah 41:4, 44:6, and 48:12. Similarly, in the New Testament, Revelation 1:8, 21:6, and 22:13 supply the view of Christ as "Alpha and Omega," "the beginning and the end" (*he archê kai to telos*), as well as "the first and the last" (*ho prôtos kai ho eschatos*).

gods *acknowledges that one does not have one's measure entirely within oneself.* As to singing and dancing, both are arts which require measure and rule of both body and soul. For Plato, play is associated with rule and measure: this is why it is both fundamental and final" (20-21, emphasis mine). God's preeminent powerfulness gives us reasons to adhere to forms of limitation, including the limitation of rules that ensure orderliness, whether in song, dance, or sacrifice. When we participate in these rule-governed activities as a way of honoring god, we show that we know our lowly human measure relative to god's greatness. In following orders, we bring about order and display orderly-living.

There is nothing shameful or demeaning for us in carrying out our duty to obey god; on the contrary, obedience is our "salvation." When we obey god, we "follow" god; we come to attain perfection through the imitation of god's ways. The dividing line begins to blur between following god through imitation and following god through obedience. Following god by imitating god paradoxically entails ruling ourselves as we take on the role of legislators, allowing us the same Protagorean end but without the (sophistic/sophisticated, self-serious) arrogance.[155]

God is all-encompassing; god is also moderate in character. Thinking of god as unable to struggle morally, it is hard to conceive of there being divine virtues (like moderation). To say that god is moderate is to mean something different from human moderation, therefore. But what would divine moderation be? One way to countenance the notion of divine moderation is to link it to measure, insisting that god is moderate *only insofar* as god is measure.[156] Plato himself says little, only attributing this quality to god indirectly, by means of his imitation principle. He states: "the moderate man is

---

[155] As Garciela E. Marcos de Pinotti writes, "*Le législateur des* Lois *représente, no moins que le philosophe de la République, une instance qui n'est pas simplement humaine mais divine ; et en s'assujetissant à celle-ci, confie Platon, l'homme atteint la perfection, en s'assimilant au dieu dans la mesure où sa nature le lui permet*" (Scolnicov, 118).

[156] This formulation of divine moderation as measure comes from Katja Vogt.

God's friend, being like him." Again, it makes sense to claim that it is unseemly for human beings to exhibit the trait of excess, but is excess not appropriate to god *qua* immortal being? In the case of (human response to) god, could excess be "friendly" and (therefore) imitable? Ardley suggests that it is fitting when he writes, "[m]easure, the mean, is the proper rule for conducting the game of life. But our devotion to God breaks through the rules of human play; in devotion to God alone there is no mean" (236). By contrast, must we accept the Stranger's statement "excess … is both its own enemy and that of due proportion" to mean that on all levels and for all beings, even god and the sub-gods, excess is *always and only* inimical? Let us trace Plato's path into the subject of divine moderation, approaching it first through a consideration of imitation and likeness.

Likeness or sameness was a defining aspect of friendship that carried some intellectual currency in the ancient Greek world. *Philos* denoted a friend, a person "dear" to one, even someone who was "one's own." In contrast to the peaceful, mutual, and harmonious relating of friends who in some sense "belonged" to each other, the relationship of enemies was marked (in general) by foreignness, otherness, difference, and strife. It is not difficult to see on which sides moderation and excess would fall in the friendship/enmity (likeness/difference, peace/war) dichotomy.

In this passage, Plato presents the grand, ethical project of shaping oneself to be *like* a superior being (here, god), although without using the (playful, theatrical) term *mimesis*. Taking the Homeric proverb "like to like" (*homoio to homoion*) to be true, he states that one should embrace or bring about behavior in one's own life that is similar to the esteemed conduct or manner of god.[157] As Saunders translates it, a person does

---

[157] Injunctions to be like God appear in the Bible, most clearly in Leviticus 11:44-45, 19:2, and 20:7, in statements, which concern God's holiness. It is noteworthy, though, that it says that it is the LORD who makes holy (20:7). This contrasts the apparent self-reliance in seeking moral improvement in the *Laws* passage above (716c7-9).

this in order to "recommend" herself to god (*prosphilê genesomenon*, literally to become

endeared or beloved). Such an undertaking is not only ethical but also friendly and

modest.[158] Because of the connection between likeness and friendship, it is behooving to

make god the object of one's imitation as one pursues divine favor and a happy life.

Moreover, an attempt of this sort of divine mimicry is a gesture born of lowliness insofar

as it makes its goal the exhibition of the pattern or stamp of god's character on one's life.

It does not involve any sort of disrespectful mocking. Such arrogance (as is typically

associated with mockery and the "mimicking" side of the sense of mimicry) is found

instead in the *refusal* of divine imitation.[159]

Plato's indirect affirmation of god's moderate character continues through the

Stranger's dismissal of excess. Following the Stranger's declaration concerning the all-

encompassing measure of god and the clear expression of his stance against Protagoras,

one might expect a depiction of god as *exceeding* in greatness. Instead of treating the

ideas of excess and the totality of the divine measure as corollary, however, the Stranger

---

Elizabeth Castelli critically addresses the discourses of mimesis in the Apostle Paul in her book *Imitating Paul*, using this very *Laws* passage as an example of the hierarchy and privileged sameness that mark ancient notions of "copying."

[158] Helen North addresses the variance in estimations of the humility or pride bound up in the idea of imitating God in moderation. "The imitation of God, which is the aim of Plato's legislation, is actually a contradiction of those traditional warnings against likening oneself to God which were among the earliest themes of sophrosyne. The conflict between *hybris* and sophrosyne, which had provided tragedy with one of its most fruitful subjects, has now largely lost its meaning, but a different conception of sophrosyne has developed and is in the process of becoming an essential part of the Platonic notion of [*homoiosis theo*]. This new conception results from the belief that God Himself is *sôphrôn*—an idea that scarcely occurs in tragedy. The problems inherent in this notion are among the favorite subjects of Hellenistic philosophy and the Church Fathers" (194).

[159] Again, parallels may be found in the Hebrew Scriptures in their portrayal of God as humble on the one hand, and as a friend to the humble, on the other hand. On the first point, instances of statements on the self-lowering of God include Psalm 18:9 ("He bowed the heavens, and came down …") and Hosea 11:4 ("I led them with cords of human kindness, with bands of love. I was to them like those who lift infants to their cheeks. I bent down to them and fed them"—note the inclusion of cord and band imagery, which recalls the strings of the puppets Plato discusses). Second, Moses (whom Numbers 12:3 describes as "very humble, more so than anyone else on the face of the earth") receives the special honor of being treated as a friend of God (Exodus 33:11). In the New Testament, when Jesus invites people to take his (light) yoke, he describes himself as gentle (*praos*) and humble (*tapeinos*) in heart (Matthew 11:29).

discusses immoderation in terms of vice. To conceive of god as so great as to be beyond measure (that is, to be *ametron*) is not proper. Alongside the impious traits of pride and arrogance, excess is ungodly.

The person who demonstrates immoderation errs in two ways. She reveals a lack of understanding of her position relative to god by failing to abide by divine-set standards; that is, she exceeds her limits. Pride and immoderation, therefore, are shown to go together. At the same time, she neglects her duty of acting like god and following god's virtuous example. Perhaps this seems like a double charge, saying little more than that her immoderation is immoderate, but it does highlight what is particularly vicious about vice—its loop of self-reinforcement. Importantly, the delusion of immoderation is conveyed in this passage through the image of *leading*. Whereas the dispositions of humility, meekness, and an intentional orientation to happiness are all said to have the willingness to *follow* Justice's lead and to *latch on* to her, the person who has cut ties with god is ill-equipped to lead a successful life. Nevertheless, in her folly, she thinks that she can both adhere to the right path and tread it for others. While not exactly in the same way, the senses of "leading," "following," and "latching on" will be recalled in the discussion of the puppet's efforts to aid in the pulling of the correct cords or strings in 644d-645c.

Much later in the *Laws*, in a fascinating passage in Book X, Plato does provide a *direct* statement of divine moderation. There, speaking (in the plural) of the gods, the Stranger offers the third of his religious defenses. In arguing for the gods' imperviousness to bribes, he links the issues of justice and moderation clearly. First, he draws the connection between divinity and rule:

> Come now, in the name of these gods themselves I ask—in what way would they come to be seduced by us, if seduced they were? Being what in their essence and character? Necessarily they must be rulers [*archontas*], if they are to be in continual [*entelechos*] control of the whole heaven. (905d-e, Bury translation)

Echoing, perhaps faintly, in these lines is the "measure of all things" saying, with its incumbent sense of the beginning (or first, *archê*), end (or last, *teleutê*), and middle (*mesê*)—the term for "ruler" in ancient Greek (*archon*) being closely bound to the notion of "beginning" (*archê*), and the root *tel-* (whether in a noun like *teleutê* or an adjective such as *entelês*) carrying the significance of completion, fullness, and end.

The argumentation of the Stranger concerning the moderation of the gods proceeds as he makes use of warfare imagery. He describes the conflict between good and bad things in life as an undying battle that requires "a wondrous watchfulness," and he uses the language of salvation to indicate the force of virtue. In this struggle, he says, the gods and spirits (*daemons*) are both the allies and possessors of human beings. With these assertions in place, he is able to continue, stating:

> [W]hat destroys us is iniquity and insolence combined with folly, what saves us, justice and temperance combined with wisdom [*sophrosynê meta phronêseos*], *which dwell in the animate powers of the gods*, and of which some small trace may be clearly seen here also residing in us. (906a-b, Bury translation, emphasis mine)

Here is the explicit statement of the temperate, or moderate, nature of the gods: *sophrosynê* dwells in their animate powers. Plato raises the stature of the quality of *sophrosynê* by associating it with justice and by attaching the phrase "with wisdom" to it. This later qualification serves to distinguish divine *sophrosynê* from the ordinary moderation of the non-philosophical (North, 189). In addition to being divine, justice and wisdom-infused temperance are saving traits that exist in a special way in our own nature—they exist merely as micro-traces, but mightily as signs of the divine.

Finally, the Stranger concludes his argument with several representations of the destruction of excess, showing that immoderation brings harm in whatever realm it is found. Such a view of vice as damaging is sensible in light of the saving power of the virtues of justice and moderation. After drawing two other analogies, the Stranger points to the immoderation that is civil injustice. He states:

> [W]e assert that the sin now mentioned, of profiteering or "over-gaining," is what is called in the case of fleshly bodies "disease," in that of seasons and years

"pestilence," and in that of States and polities, by a verbal change, this same sin is called "injustice." (906c, Bury translation)

The gods, themselves rulers, abide by a spirit of orderliness or rule. In their justice, therefore, they are not tempted by the excess of bribery, which prideful people produce as an attempt to further their own over-gain. Combining these lines from Book X with the primary measure passage of Book IV illuminates fairly strongly Plato's sense of the trait of divine moderation and its instantiation in virtuous persons.

It has been noted, then, that Plato recommends that we become like god in moderation and humility for the sake of befriending god and having happiness in life. These are the who, what, how, and why of imitation. There is one more aspect of imitation to analyze here and that is its *extent*. Given that god holds the beginning, end, and middle of all things, our project of following god (in respectfully playful imitation and obedience) equally stretches across the whole of our lives. Freydberg points to this life-encompassing range of play when he writes:

> Recall that the supposedly serious and rational Socrates practices music on his final day, writing (among other things) a hymn to Apollo in verse. Death is nothing serious, or rather death receives its proper seriousness when it is confronted playfully. And the Stranger's playful passage from the *Laws* recollects the lawful play at the heart of all things: relation to the gods, music, gymnastic, even warfare. From initiation through death, humankind dwells playfully. (21)

This commentary, coupled with the measure passage under consideration, forms an important part of my argument about human play: unlike the principle governing our work, our play callings as individual human beings are not determined by any part of our own natures but come instead as a response to god's nature. The measure and moderation of god has universal implications, or applicability. We would all do well to play at the game of life by participating in sacrifices, songs, and dances because that is fitting to the singular nature of god.

Having traipsed a long way to arrive at these conceptions of god as all-encompassing yet moderate, and having tried to maintain the tension that results from the difference between the two traits, we may now find it necessary to bring them

together. Rather than asking how measure and moderation separate from each other as ideas, let us inquire into the closeness of their relation, focusing in particular on the manner in which moderation is identifiable with the (lowly) measure of humility. To some degree, this will involve a shift in attention from divine to human measure.

Helen North writes about moderation, or temperance, devoting her 1966 book *Sophrosyne: Self-Knowledge and Self-Restraint in Greek Literature* to a study of the virtue's development from Homeric poetry through the early Christian writings of the fourth century C.E. She defines *sophrosynê* as "the harmonious product of intense passion under perfect control" (x), and proposes that it stands in polar opposition to the active principle (*to drastêrion*) and the trait of manliness (*andreia*) (ix). This accords with a statement the Stranger makes in 802e, namely that "an elevated manner and courageous instincts must be regarded as characteristic of the male, while a tendency to modesty and restraint must be presented – in theory and law alike – as a peculiarly feminine trait." Interestingly however, moderation is treated at the same time as a quality belonging to the gods and as characteristic of older men—like the figures of the *Laws* and the aging Plato who wrote them (North, 191-192).

Plato puts the term and idea of *sophrosynê* to dynamic use in his dialogues, which, in their earliest stage, elevate Socrates as the exemplar of the virtue (152). As prominent themes of the late dialogues North identifies "moderation, proportion, the Mean, symmetry, and harmony," remarking that they are all analogues to *sophrosynê* (188). When discussing appearances of *sophrosynê* in the *Laws* specifically, she notes that it is upheld there as the quality without which the other goods are not good, even though it is never afforded priority where listings of the four virtues occur (187).[160] With respect to its status vis-à-vis the virtue of justice, she writes that moderation receives the greater emphasis in the *Laws* on account of Plato's particularly strong interest in the

---

[160] There she cites the passages 696b, 697b, 710a, and 728e-729a.

training of the irrational soul. Nevertheless, she affirms that "at the highest level" *sophrosynê*—"the power of self-mastery … instilled by education in conformity with the laws"—and justice are identical (189).

As noted at the outset, *tapeinôtes*, which I have occasionally referred to as "humility," is a manner of lowliness. The lowness of this character trait is apparent in its connection to the verb for *to lower* (*tapeinein*), which forms the root of the word for carpet (*tapês*, which becomes *tapis* in French) and frequently carries the pejorative sense of abasement. Perhaps it is this positional description of what it is to be moderate that allows for an understanding of the sense of *following* that is inherent in obedience. That is, obedience is predicated on meekness because it entails compliance. The person who obeys does not play a leading role. Taking a common view of pride as an antonym of humility, one can say that the prideful person, insofar as she thinks too *highly* of herself, is unrulable. She doesn't play well with others. The moderate person by contrast exhibits humility in her willing *sub*mission to the rules and (or of) authorities. She places herself under the limits of god. This positional aspect of virtue takes on an interesting relevance when applied to Plato's use of the puppet image. Citing R.A. Higgins, Rankin writes of the construction of dangling, "dancing dolls" of antiquity, observing that the strings came out of their heads (130). Because the strings are pulled from above (by the Most High?), to be led is to be low.[161,162]

---

[161] John Russon points to the suggestions in the *Laws*, Book II that the figure of the child is "easy to lead and teach" (65).

[162] Dorothea Frede's reading of the matter of being led by the god differs in a striking way from my interpretation of what Plato takes it to mean to be a divine toything. She states: "Although *thauma* is commonly translated as 'puppet,' this translation is misleading if it suggests that humans are mere marionettes whose strings are pulled by the gods. For, as the further descriptions show, the 'puppet's' behavior is not determined by the higher powers; it depends, rather, on the workings of its own strings. Hence, Plato seems to have in mind wind-up toys that move by themselves, rather than marionettes" (116). In addition to the curiosity of the hybrid toy that Frede envisions (of a wind-up doll with strings instead of an easier to imagine marionette), it is worth nothing that Frede refers in this passage to the gods as the *higher* powers, which is also suggestive of figures that direct toys from above—the very idea that she rejects.

A modest person seeks to live within the limits of her own measure, which she sees as fixed in some way by the place of god and by others. An unjust person, however, presents a very different picture. Unlike the self-containment of the humble person, she is full of herself to the point of bursting forth with pride (*hybris*). This excess of self is both chaotic and chaos-producing. The improper over-fullness of greediness (*pleonexia)* reflects a lack of order in the internal realm—it is damaging to the self, to be sure—but it is also deeply problematic for the social, political world. By trying to attend to more than her "fair share," the immoderate person interferes with the fulfillment of roles belonging to other individuals, and so she disrupts the harmonious balance of parts. Such self-seeking (*idiopragia*) North describes as antithetical to *sophrosynê* and justice (193). It is also related, I think, to rule by self-inferior parts.

III. THE PLAY OF THE ROPE AND THE (COM)PLIABILITY OF REASON:

THE GENTLE SLACKNESS OF THE PUPPET'S GOLDEN CORD

(TEXT: 1.644D-645C)

Shifting now in our analysis, let us take a step backward to enter into the discourse at the moment in Book I in which the Stranger introduces the bold and initially not-inoffensive comparison between human beings and divine toys. In doing so, we will discover the quality of pliability that adheres in reason; the connection pliability and rationality have to "teachability"; and the implication this rational pliability holds for a citizen's ability to be compliant in the political sphere. While education feeds rationality and nourishes its growth, being reasonable also enables a person to be responsive to education, which furthers civic justice. The docility wrapped up in this capacity of being teachable is not unrelated to the characteristic of gentleness noted in moderation; it also appears in the understanding of justice as knowing "how to rule and be ruled" (643e).

The Stranger's statements, which introduce the puppet figure, read:

I suggest we look at the problem in this way: let's imagine [conceive, *dianoêthômen*] that each of us living beings [*zôôn*] is a puppet [*thauma*] of the gods. Whether we have been constructed to serve as their plaything [*paignion*], or for some serious [*spoudê*] reason, is something beyond our ken, but what we certainly do know is this: we have those emotions [*pathê*] in us, which act like cords or strings [*neura ê mêrinthoi*] and tug us about; they work in opposition, and tug against each other to make us perform actions that are opposed correspondingly; back and forth we go across the boundary line where vice and virtue meet. One of these dragging forces [*helzeôn zunepomenon*], according to our argument [*logos*], demands our constant obedience, and this is the one we have to hang on to, come what may; the pull of the other cords we must resist. This cord, which is golden and holy, transmits the power of 'calculation' [*logismos*], a power which in a state is called the public law; being golden, it is pliant, while the others, whose composition resembles a variety of other substances, are tough and inflexible. The force [*agôgê*] exerted by law is excellent, and one should always co-operate [*zullambanein*] with it, because although 'calculation' is a noble thing, it is gentle [*praou*], not violent [forceful, *biaioui*], and its efforts [its leading (string), *agôgên*] need assistants, so that the gold in us may prevail over the other substances. If we do give our help, the moral point of this fable [*mythos*], in which we appear as puppets [*thaumatôn*], will have been well and truly made; the meaning of the terms 'self-superior' and 'self-inferior' will somehow become clearer, and the duties of state and individual will be better appreciated. The latter must digest the truth about these forces [*helzeôn*] that pull him, and act on it in his life; the state must get an account of it either from one of the gods or from the human expert we've mentioned, and incorporate it in the form of a law to govern both its internal affairs and its relations with other states. A further result will be a clearer distinction between virtue and vice; the light cast on that problem will perhaps in turn help to clarify the subject of education and the various other practices, particularly the business of drinking parties. It may well be thought that this is a triviality [*phaulou*] on which a great deal too much has been said, but equally it may turn out that the topic really does deserve this extended discussion. (644d-645c)

Plato has a message to convey about the value of *logos* and its relation to the passions; this message is a trope running across many of his dialogues. In the *Republic*, reason is seen in its representation as the supreme faculty governing the lesser parts of courage and desire in the souls of the philosophers. The philosophers are raised to serve as the vicars of Reason in the *polis*, holding control over the other classes of soldiers and artisans. Reigns turn into reins when Plato writes the *Phaedrus*, presenting the battle within the soul there as an agony-filled fight for control over warring winged-horses

(246a-ff).[163] Of the pair, one horse is obedient and does not need a whip; the other horse is undisciplined and does not readily heed the whip's blows. The successful charioteer is the one who aims her vision after the intelligible, *logos*-infused truths of heaven. She is only able to tame the unruly horse after repeated and severe punishments—but when she prevails she arrives at happiness.[164]

To this collection of symbols, Plato adds his illustration in the *Laws* of human beings as puppets and divine toys. Rankin articulates this choice in rather negative cultural terms, writing, "This kind of toy is a by no means inept symbol of Fourth Century B.C. Greek man, disoriented, randomly impulsive, and individualist. His spasmodic movements, imagined as those of a [*paignion*] perhaps represent yet another reply to [*pantôn metron anthrôpos,* man, measure of all things]" (129). Here, the cords used by the charioteer to rein in out-of-control forces morph into the slack and stiff cords engaged in a struggle in marionettes for the determination of their movement. The way that Plato seeks to recommend the faculty of reason to Cleinias and Megillus and eventually the new *polis* Magnesia—recalling the significance of the aim of *self-superiority* to the individual and city's vitality and peace—is by depicting the victory of the single, golden cord over the disorderly pull of the many lesser, toughened strings in the puppet. A well-pulled puppet exhibits graceful movement, gliding along, and thus offers a picture of the beautiful regulation that is predicated on the gentleness and modesty of the ability to follow and obey. Freedom here would appear as something like the absence of jerky movements. Notably, it would be tied to obedience.

---

[163] Paul Plass's insightful article "'Play' and Philosophic Detachment in Plato" focuses on the *Phaedrus*, treating play as a bridge between the rational and sensuous spheres (343).

[164] Remarkably similar language as is found in the discussion of ethics, play, and education in the *Laws* marks this passage from the *Phaedrus*: "Now if the victory goes to the better elements in both their minds, which lead them to follow the assigned regimen of philosophy, their life here below is one of bliss and shared understanding. They are modest and fully in control of themselves now that they have enslaved the part that brought trouble into the soul and set free the part that gave it virtue. After death, when they have grown wings and become weightless, they have won the first of three rounds in these, the true Olympic Contests. There is no greater good than this that either human self-control or divine madness can offer a man" (256a-b).

Along with the discussion of pliability mentioned above, this section of the paper will be addressed to some of the connotations of these strings, and the advantages and ambiguities of the larger play image to which they belong. It proceeds first by considering how the Stranger invokes play at this moment in the argument and why he might choose to present his philosophy in such a seriously non-serious domain.

A funny person is funnier for her subtlety but forfeits some or all of her humor when she has to announce, "I am joking now!" Similarly, it would be terribly unplayful for the Stranger to advertise his play directly. Rather, he signals his *paidistic* intentions— preparing the playful way—through his careful choice of language ("educational" vocabulary); his willingness to employ analogy and make-believe at all (myth); and the specific images that end up in his speech (puppets and toys). Before entering a discourse of play with puppetry, he tunes his listeners' ears by using the close-sounding words of education. Thus, the speeches leading into this section are dominated by references to noble or proper *paideia*: he is only an *epsilon* away from play now. A second way to propose that the Stranger marks his intention to play is to illumine his decision to depart from literal forms of speech. He includes myth in his comments—and here he does make his reliance on myth explicit, saying "the moral point of this fable [*mythos*] …" In making room for the *ana*logous and make-believe, he distances himself from, and lightens, a heavy account (*logos*). Lastly, the Stranger indicates the ludic direction of his thought through the particular image he supplies. Rather than the boring ideas of a city or a horse, he uses puppets because puppets almost reflexively invoke a sense of play and playfulness. What if we approached this from a serious perspective, though, keeping in mind the serious context of the puppetry reference in the *Republic*? Is there special significance to puppets appearing on the scene in order to announce *spoudê*?[165]

---

[165] On the natural association between puppetry, children, and play, Rankin writes: "Furthermore, the puppet is associated with childhood. Its movements at the end of its string can be called [*paidia*]. But there is also [*paideia*]. The equivocation [*paidia*/*paideia*], schooling (through) play can help to make the victory of the string of [*logismos*] more certain. The association between

Two words in ancient Greek, which signify "puppet" are *neurospastos* and *thauma*; added to these is the term *paignion*, which bears the *pai-* of play (*paidia*, *paizein*), and means "toy," "plaything," or even "playmate." The first two words correspond roughly to the French *une marionette*, while the third might find translation as *un jouet*.[166] Emmanuelle Jouët-Pastré sheds light on important differences in the range of the meaning of these words or the register of their applicability in ancient Greek. Relative to the word *thauma*, *neurospastos* is an ordinary term, which denotes something mechanical (50). *Neurospastos* comes from the noun used for "sinew" or "cord made of sinew" (*neuron*) and the verb for "to draw." This accords with an understanding of a puppet as a *thing* mechanically drawn by strings. In quite another domain—perhaps a miraculous one—*thauma* denotes an object of wonder or a marvel. It can also be taken as a "puppet," however, and in the plural it can refer to a *puppet show* or *toy theater*. We are able to glimpse, therefore, the possible grandness implied in the description of human beings as *thauma* and divine *paignion*. Rather than being mechanical "dummies" (*neurospasta*), in our belonging to the gods, we are wondrous.[167]

Wavering himself between serious and trivial evaluations of the topics at hand, the Stranger makes a pretty serious push in this passage toward the playful: but, why? Why does he bring together things that normally should be kept apart, combining for

---

education through play with toys and the puppet analogy was close for Plato when he wrote the *Laws*. The two notions are linked (they are spatially close in the text, *Laws* 643-644), by the idea of the jointed clay doll" (130).

[166] Additionally, the word *korê*—primarily translated as "girl"—can mean "doll" or "puppet." Plato does not seem to use it in this dialogue in that manner, though. A more interesting connection might be found between *korê* and *choros*—"chorus"—in the chorus of girls in 12.947b, for example. Plass points out the derivation of *choros* from *chara* (delight), which, in turn, is related to the term Christians celebrate as "gift" or "grace"—*charis* (363). The closeness in the senses of music and delight is reflected again in the words *ôdai* (songs) and *epôdai* (charms), which Plato puns in 653b.

[167] It is interesting that the Septuagint employs forms of *thauma* twice in its rendering of Psalm 138:14, *ezomologêsomai soi hoti phoberôs ethaumastôthên thaumasia ta erga sou kai hê psychê mou ginôskei sphodra* ("I praise you, for I am fearfully and *wonderfully* made. *Wonderful* are your works; that I know very well").

example the logical and mythical? What is he trying to accomplish in presenting a *mythos* with(in) a *logos*—a fable with a purpose in a rational account—injecting the make-believe into the really real, only to weigh the mythic story down by attaching an important moral to it? After all, a lot is riding on this toy-based analogy—including the meaning of the term "self-superior" and an understanding of civic and personal duties, but also the illumination of virtue and vice! After having announced the topic of "true" education in which the hardly frivolous matters of virtue and justice are at stake (643e-644a), the Stranger mentions moveable dolls, transforming puppets into the representatives of ethics. Is there intentionality behind all of these confusing moves, governing and directing them?

I would like to suggest that in his bizarre mixing of the weighty significance of education and ethics with the lightness and frivolousness typically—but not universally—associated with play and puppets, the Stranger is offering an enactment of temperance. He demonstrates what it is to moderate the high (*paideia*) by the low (*paidia*) and the low by the high—to arrive at middle ground by alternating between extreme sides. In obedience, humility finds itself Reason's partner. Or as Ardley astutely writes, Plato uses "a little absurdity to humble a greater absurdity" (243). In this case, I am arguing that the image or myth of human beings as puppets stands for the little absurdity while the Protagorean view of humanity as the measure of all things represents the greater—and more dangerous—absurdity that threatens the genuine good of education and ethics. Human beings may not be puppets with free will but, in truth, neither are we the supreme arch-beings of the universe that Protagoras makes us out to be. Having seen that excess is not appropriate even for god, we can now accept that it is certainly not warranted for education. To treat education too seriously, to lift it too high, is immoderate and therefore destructive. To trivialize play is debasing and unnecessary. To use play to moderate education is just right. Plato swings the philosophical pendulum, then, watching over it until it strikes upon the good balance of

the middle ground. Or, along the lines of the Stranger's advice to nurses for how to handle babies suffering from Corybantic—Bacchanalian, frenzied—conditions, he shakes troubled ideas up for the sake of settling them down (790c-e).

In thinking why Plato figures out (or en-figures) features of human nature and activity through puppets, we confront the simultaneous advantages and limitations his analogy presents. It excels in conveying the ideas of unity and coordination of parts. Where it breaks down is in offering a sensible depiction of free motion and free will. Does it not rather lend itself to conveying a message of determinism? In addition to its advantages and limitations, there are a number of ambiguities in the image and its presentation. Let us take these areas and the interests they include in turn, starting with the "positive" use of the puppet image by a consideration of strings and reason. Then, we will return to the weakness of the puppet image for the expression of who we are as human beings, pointing out several of the ways in which it lacks clarity.

On account of the movement achieved through the simultaneous pulling of numerous and different strings, the figure of a stringed-puppet is well suited to explaining coordination. It also illustrates the importance of the free, unhindered movement of the strings. If you are walking on a tightrope, you desperately want the cord to be taut, but a degree of slackness becomes desirable in the cords that serve as puppet strings. Such play of a rope enables a puppeteer to bring about graceful movements in the marionette figure, pulling here, lifting there, raising up and letting down again—all through coordinated and well-timed gestures and not a little skill. Here, slackness is not the laziness of slacking off (in the sense of Proverbs 18:9, "[o]ne who is slack in work is kin to a vandal!"), but is the condition for the possibility of something quite great—the smooth movement of different parts. The wonder of the play of this rope is the douceur of reason.

The Stranger represents the cord of reason, which is the conductor of calculation [*logismos*], as single and golden.[168] In this it is distinct from the other strings, which are many in number and composition. Reason's one string is also one in purity, untainted by any non-gold elements. On account of this simplicity, when taken on its own and apart from its fraught association with the passions' group of strings, reason may be thought of as forming a whole unit—peaceful because unmarked by division. That is, whereas clashes exist among the passions in their multiplicity, and while there is strife between reason and passion, reason in itself is free from internal war and the tyranny of desire.

The goldenness of reason carries other connotations. Not only a sign of reason's nobility and worth—or perhaps *as* a sign of reason's nobility and worth—it implies the quality of gentleness, too. Contrary to expectations, this trait is its excellence. What is strong may give the impression of being stable, enduring, and independent but in the Stranger's speech such "strength" is viewed and rejected as rigidity that hinders graceful movement.[169] Thus, gentleness-as-pliability is valuable precisely in its contradistinction to the hard and coercive tugs of the other cords. This opposition between gentleness and force seems to carry over to their corresponding qualifications. That is, the contrast between the two ideas is reflected in the general sense that there is a refinement, nobility, and genteelness to gentleness that is lacking from force.[170] Conceived as being to some extent undignified, force is left simply to be called *brute*. Despite impressions of being weak *because* easily swayed, then, what is gentle proves its worth in that very

---

[168] What does calculation calculate? Does it ascertain human limits and measure?

[169] This description—particularly in terms of movement—raises potential connections between seriousness, rigidity, and dualism, on the one hand, and play, thirdness, and flexibility, on the other hand, that I would like to explore. Is there a fluidity to trichotomous ways of thinking that is impossible in binary ("either/or") schemas? If strict bifurcations are marked by inertia, are trinities always on the move? And, how could I maintain a spirit of "thirdness" in approaching these (apparently dichotomous) connections?

[170] By way of Greek etymology (*genos*, "race"), there is a strange equivocation in the French adjective *gentil*, which can mean both "Gentile" and "nice" or "gentle."

attribute of movability. Or, in the words of the speech we will consider from Book VII, it is "a great point in its favor."

In addition to usefully absurd features of the puppet image, there are a number of ambiguities in its content and delivery. The first unclarity I would like to discuss concerns who or what counts as a puppet. Because of the terminology he uses, it seems that the Stranger leaves room for the consideration of animals as divine puppets too. In setting out his analogy, he uses the term "*zôôn*," which is indicative of living beings generally, encompassing more than human beings. Would such an estimation counteract the point the illustration is seeking to make regarding the importance of *reason* and calculation in humankind? Would it elevate the stature of animals by linking them along with us—even as toys—to the divine? The Stranger does not pursue the discussion of animal-puppets here, but the question remains why in presenting these toys he chooses the term for "living being" instead of the narrower designation of *anthropos*. Furthermore, toward the end of the passage, given the Stranger's political remarks and the parallels he draws between reason and law, there could be speculation about the identity of the *state* as a puppet, its legislators being the puppet masters—giving new (or rather old) meaning to the term "puppet government."[171]

Of course, part of what makes the puppet illustration so odd is the indeterminacy of agency in it: who or what is at work pulling the strings? Any direct reference to the gods as manipulating the marionettes' actions is missing. In having the gods drop out of view in this way, the Stranger both avoids depicting the world in a deterministic fashion and absolves the gods from any responsibility for evil. Instead of being at the mercy of divine players, the puppet show appears to be self-running. The

---

[171] Shortly before this passage, the Stranger identifies the State with the individual and living beings in the area of temperance, drawing a link between them in the statements: "Pleasure and pain, you see, flow like two springs released by nature. If a man draws the right amount from the right one at the right time, he lives a happy life; but if he draws unintelligently at the wrong time, his life will be rather different. State and individual and every living being are on the same footing here" (636d-e).

emotions pull themselves. This turns the *thaumata* into atypical toys indeed and it lends a greater air of nonsensicality to the fable, but it preserves for Plato the possibility of making a point about the willfulness and drive of the passions. Furthermore, on account of these two sets of strings, the Stranger's story is able to provide an explanation of the obedience that comes about when conflicting parts heed the internally superior element. The question becomes, however, whether this need to represent the strings as self-tugging dissolves the image. It is easy to imagine figures being yanked back and forth by opposing forces, but would they still be puppets?

Then there are the multiple layers of interpretation opened by the uncertainty of the phrase, "[w]hether we have been constructed to serve as their [the gods'] plaything, or for some serious reason, is something beyond our ken." Is the Stranger calling into question here whether we are *puppets* of the gods, or whether we are puppets *of the gods*? In other words, should we consider the gods to be toymakers? What are the implications of the view of human beings as toy artifacts *constructed by the gods*? Should we make toys, too? Would it make the gods children or childish, if we were their toys? In what way would we *lose* standing if we were created for a purpose *apart* from play, and would that purpose also be apart from god? Being unsure about our playful or purposive standing, the Stranger (prefiguring Kant) espouses the one certainty, which is that the moral life is marked by internal conflict.

IV. Marvelous Living: Religion, Peace, Happiness, and Education

(Text: 7.803A-804C)

A lot transpires philosophically between the first and seventh books, with only one intervening puppet reference, which comes in 2.658c in the discussion of judging competitions. There, at one end of the *agon*-and-age hierarchy, little kids are said to prefer puppet shows; up the line go older children (who have a taste for comedies) and

the majority of the people (who enjoy tragedy), until old men are found with their penchant for poetry at the apex. When the Stranger next invokes the toy symbol alongside the claim that it represents us, he shocks or amazes Megillus. Speaking of weighty matters and employing stock phrases that signal ethics—"the right way to live," "the best and noblest conduct"—Plato through the Stranger makes recourse to the play of the puppet myth. As soon as it looks as if things are becoming too serious, he announces that it is time to play—or insists that he is only playing. This is analogous to the signs dogs give when they engage in play that is threatening in becoming too extreme. (I am confident that Plato would not be offended at this comparison; he regarded dogs as the most philosophical animal.) The contemporary journalist Robin Henig describes dogs as having "a particular body posture called the 'play bow' — forelegs extended, rump in the air — that they use as both invitation and punctuation. A dog will perform a play bow at the beginning of a bout, and he will crouch back into it if he accidentally nips too hard and wants to assure the other dog: 'Don't worry! Still playing!'" Plato embodies this posture philosophically, assuaging any concern among his playmates that the conversation is in danger of becoming too earnest, self-important, or boring. This is all just a game. Still playing!

The Stranger's ludic(rous) style matches his subject matter because education and moral training are equally play. That is, he talks about our way of life playfully because ethics is no more than a game. Furthermore, life-as-play bears a relation to both war and peace. It is like war in that it is a struggle one wages with the weapon of honor.[172] This is its agonistic side. However, life and play are more deeply bound up

---

[172] Along with the "missile" targeted at piety, the weapon of honor is presented in 717a (the continuation of the "measure passage" presented above). This section of the text contains several significant statements, which accord with the description of the consequences (or "rewards") of good, playful conduct in the current lines of interest from 803-804. The Stranger says: "Let's be clear that the consequence of all this is the following doctrine (which is, I think, of all doctrines the finest and truest): If a good man sacrifices to the gods and keeps them constant company in prayers and offerings and every kind of worship he can give them, this will be the best and noblest policy he can follow; it is the conduct that fits his character as nothing else can, and it is his most effective way of achieving a happy life. But if the wicked man does it, the results are

with peace—in excellence and practicality. First, unlike war, peace is sought for its own sake. This merits the preeminence of play in our thought; we should be foremost oriented toward it and not war. Second, play requires the "free" time that peace provides. (Does this imply a relation between work and war?) Only under certain conditions do we have the means to sacrifice, sing, and dance. In times of extreme duress and hardship, when play is perhaps the most needed, does it feel the least possible. In these associations with education, ethics, and peace, the concept of play widens, swelling to the point of encompassing the highest, most important aspects of life.

Reformulated simply, the argument of this second puppet speech is that *because* we are the playthings of the gods, we should ourselves play. Upon reflection, however, this makes little sense. Recalling the slip between the activities of legislating and playing—the one who provides the rules for a game is not necessarily a member of it— we now wonder how toys, which are *objects* of play, are to count as *players*. This is the strange logic, which the Stranger employs. He presents the conclusion that every human being should play well in the pastime, playtime, or peacetime of life after he makes these four assertions: 1) serious matters deserve serious attention, 2) god is the object worthy of serious effort, 3) human beings are toys for god, and 4) our best feature as human beings is our divine toy-identity.

Here are his comments, at length:

> Now to deal with how this doctrine should be taught and handed on. What method of instruction should we use? Who should be taught, and when should the lessons take place? Well, you know that when a shipwright is starting to build a boat, the first thing he does is to lay down the keel as a foundation and as a general indication of the shape. I have a feeling my own procedure now is

bound to be just the opposite. … So this is the target at which we should aim – but what 'missiles' are we to use to hit it, and what 'bow' is best carried to shoot them? Can we name these 'weapons'? The first weapon in our armoury will be to honour the gods of the underworld next after those of Olympus, the patron-gods of the state … That's the best way a man can hit his target, piety. … If we do that, and live in accordance with these rules, each of us will get the reward we deserve from the gods and such beings as are superior to ourselves, and live in a spirit of cheerful confidence for most of the years of our life" (716d-718a).

exactly analogous. I'm trying to distinguish for you the various ways in which our character shapes the kind of life we live; I really am trying to 'lay down the keel', because I'm giving proper consideration to the way we should try to live—to the 'character-keel' we need to lay if we are going to sail through this voyage of life successfully. Not that human affairs are worth taking very seriously [*spoudês*]—but take them seriously [*spoudazein*] is just what we are forced to do, alas. Still, perhaps it will be realistic to recognize the position we're in and direct our serious efforts to some suitable purpose. My meaning?—yes, you'd certainly be right to take me up on that.

CLINIAS: Exactly.

ATHENIAN: I maintain that serious matters [*to … spoudaion*] deserve our serious attention [*spoudazein*], but trivialities do not [*to … mê spoudaion mê*]; that all men of good will should put God at the center of their thoughts [*phusei de einai theon men pasês makariou spoudês azion* – the object really worthy of all serious and blessed effort is God[173]]; that man, as we said before [644d ff.], has been created as a toy for God [*theou ti paignion einai memêxanêmenon*]; and that this is the great point [*beltiston*] in his favour. So every man and every woman should play this part and order their whole life accordingly, engaging in the best possible pastimes [*paizonta hoti kallistas paidias* – playing at the noblest of pastimes]—in a quite different frame of mind to their present one.

CLINIAS: How do you mean?

ATHENIAN: The usual view nowadays, I fancy, is that the purpose of serious [*tas spoudas*] activity is leisure [*paidiôn* – play] —that war, for instance, is an important business [*spoudaia* – serious work] and needs to be waged efficiently for the sake of peace. But in cold fact neither the immediate result nor the eventual consequences of warfare ever turn out to be *real* leisure [*paidia* – play] or an education [*paideia*] that really deserves the name [*aziologos*]—and education is in our view just about the most important [*spoudaiotaton* – most serious] activity of all. So each of us should spend the greater part of his life at peace, and that will be the best use of this time. What, then, will be the right way to live? A man should spend his whole life at 'play' [*paizonta … tinas … paidias* – we should live our lives playing at certain pastimes]—sacrificing, singing, dancing—so that he can win the favor of the gods and protect himself from his enemies and conquer them in battle. He'll achieve both these aims if he sings and dances in the way we've outlined; his path, so to speak, has been marked out for him and he must go on his way confident that the poet's words are true.

> *Some things, Telemachus, your native wit will tell you,*
> *And Heaven will prompt the rest. The very gods, I'm sure,*
> *Have smiled upon your birth and helped to bring you up.*

And those we bring up, too, must proceed in the same spirit. They must expect that although our advice is sound as far as it goes, their guardian deity will make them further suggestions about sacrifices and dancing—telling them the various divinities in whose honour they should hold their various games [*prospaizontes*], and on what occasions, so as to win the gods' good will and live the life that their own nature demands, puppets [*thaumata*] that they are, mostly, and hardly real at all [*smikra de alêtheias atta metexontes* – yet share occasionally in the truth].

MEGILLUS: That, sir, is to give the human race a very low rating [*diaphaulizeis*] indeed.

---

[173] R.G. Bury's translation is the source of the alternate renderings of phrases offered throughout this citation.

> ATHENIAN: Don't be taken aback [*mê thaumasês*], Megillus. You must make allowances for me. I said that with my thoughts on God, and was quite carried away [*pros gar ton theon apidôn kai pathôn eipon hoper eirêka nun* – For when I spoke thus, I had my mind set on God, and was feeling the emotion to which I gave utterance]. So, if you like, let's take it that our species is *not* worthless [*mê phaulon*], but rather something rather important [*spoudês de tinos azion* – but worthy of serious attention]. (803a-804c, original emphasis in italics, underlined emphasis mine)

This passage repeats a number of the themes and ideas encountered in the two previous texts—including word play (to paraphrase the Stranger, "Don't marvel that we are marvelous (puppets), Megillus"); the strategic use of ambiguity (that is, the uncertainty concerning whether human beings are real or not, and the silence over the issue—not at all obvious—of why we are forced to take ourselves seriously); the exhortation to follow a path of justice that we did not determine ourselves; the incorporation of the serious into play and of the playful into the serious; the moderation of extremes; and the (surprising) description of the Stranger as himself having the experience of being in passion's grip and getting carried away (perhaps being caught in a response to the divine marked with excess). Rather than go through these elements in detail again, I would like to focus on the remarkable claim that religious sacrifices may be defined as forms of play. Seeking a different approach to this third reading, I am choosing to analyze it through the lens of the philosophy of the Jewish scholar Jerome Gellman.

Gellman, like the Stranger, exhibits strange combinatorial powers. This is evident in his book *Abraham! Abraham!* where he provides a stirring and paradoxical view of religious sacrifice. He approaches the most sober story of Genesis 22, in all its incomprehensibility and capacity to disturb, by applying a funny fable to it. In his chapter "The *Akedah* as Divine Comedy," he looks to the Hasidic tale of Reb Nachman of Breslav in order to interpret Abraham's willingness to offer as a burnt sacrifice his miraculous and most precious son Isaac through whom God's promise of blessing was to be fulfilled. This unconventional way of reading the text may be recognized—or

rescued—as biblical in light of Genesis 21:3. There Sarah, in response to her own

laughter at the divine (in chapter 18), names her child "he laughs." In doing so, she

seems to acknowledge that God played a gracious joke on her. Perhaps the language of

laughter announces comedy, preparing for the further understanding of the

commandment to consume Isaac as "nothing but a joke." Still playing!

The story Reb Nachman tells goes something like this: There once was a king

who commanded a wise person to travel to a distant land in order to obtain a picture of

that country's king, who was truthful, humble, and hidden. The wise person goes. When

he arrives he tries to discern truths about the new culture from its jokes. All he finds,

however, is deceit and bribery. Finally he reaches the king himself, and speaks to him

across the curtain that keeps his holiness separate. He tells him that he knows that he is

truthful because he stands aloof from his people's lies. "He started praising the king

very much. The king was very humble, and his greatness lay in his humility. And this is

the way of the humble person: the more one praises and exalts him, the smaller and

humbler he becomes. Because of the greatness of the praise with which the wise man

praised and exalted the king, the king became very humble and small, till he became

nothing at all" (quoted in Gellman, 15). The wise person brings back a blank portrait.

As Gellman lifts out, the point of the story is an expression of the utter otherness

of God (16). God's absolute transcendence relates to—or, more strongly, determines—

human powerlessness to know God's nature through our actions. We honor this

unapproachable greatness in the simple recognition of our rituals as inadequate jokes

(17). On its own, all of this is quite interesting and radical, yet Gellman goes further. It is

in this additional push that his thought has the most light to shine on the paradox of

play in Plato. He writes:

> I want to point out that the comic aspect of a religious act does not imply a lack
> of seriousness in its performance. On the contrary. The more seriously one
> performs the ritual knowing it is all a comedy, the more one attests to the
> greatness of God. This is because one proclaims, as it were, that no matter what
> one does, no matter *how* seriously and meticulously one performs all of the

minute details of the ritual, *it is still a comedy*! It is a comedy because it is done so seriously. Hence, the more serious the greater the comedy! (18, original emphasis)

In a positive way that (for me) stretches the limits of conceivability, Gellman suggests how one can maintain the tension between the playful comedy and the tragic seriousness of religious sacrifice. Knowing that ritual practices are jokes actually gives a religious believer—or, following Plato, a religious player—reasons to engage in religion *more* seriously. But this seriousness is moderated by the modest measure of humankind. That is, on account of our human nature and the nature of God, we face the limitations of our seriousness. The solemnity with which we perform religious acts cannot make them effective. It does not have the power. Rather, God sets the measuring line, and it is a funny one. Attempts to grow close to God are less funny (and less honoring) if they are less earnest, and so, with temperance, we continue and even increase in seriousness. If we can keep both angles in view, we successfully trace the dialectical circle or careen along the playful moebius strip. Or, to evoke an earlier image, we may say that the pendulum strikes the spot in which the playful and the serious—the modest and the magnanimous—merge. Returning to Plato's serious fable, we may see a puppet that is poised, dangling above the boundary line where virtue and vice meet.

Chapter 5

Strenuous but Unstriving:

Christianity, Improvisation, and the Liberated Effort of Graceful Play

In this chapter, I argue that improvisation is a theologically instructive form of play that approximates grace in three respects: first, as the power to move easily within an otherwise uncomfortable set of constraints—an ability, it is important to note, that emerges from rigorous training; second, as the assurance of redemption in the face of failures; and third, as a peculiar kind of working, which produces something distinct from "works"—a result that may be expressed in the Christian parlance of "free works." Furthermore, it is my contention that freedom is exhibited under each of these iterations of improvisatory grace. In the first sense of moving gracefully within tight spaces, there is the freedom of actively appropriating—even embracing—boundaries and rules. Here, limitations are transformed into means of liberty. In the second sense of grace as guaranteed redeemability, there is the freedom to fail. This attitude towards failure frees one from being bogged down by or in the past; thus, it serves improvisers' proclivity to move on and keep the play going. In the third sense of grace as the basis for working-*sans*-works, there is the freedom from instrumentality. The peculiar "works" of improvisation and faith are free because they are performed for the sake of pleasure rather than any external purpose; they have intrinsic finality.

After introducing some general yet essential aspects of improvisation, I will unfold my argument that improvisation exemplifies freedom and grace in three sections, each devoted to one aspect of their conjunction. In doing so, I will bring to bear the recent scholarship of Danielle Goldman and Gary Peters. Goldman supplies indispensable insight into the nature of improvisation as a practice of freedom in movement (corresponding to the first iteration of grace as inward rigor and outward

ease), whereas Peters addresses the remaining two views of grace with respect to failure and works.

Keeping with the inspiration for this dissertation, there will be Kierkegaardian layers to these sections. Unlike the earlier chapters, however, these will be engaged explicitly in the body of the chapter. Along with presenting the graceful freedom of movement in Section A, it is apt to discuss Kierkegaard's illustration from *Fear and Trembling* of the knight of faith as a supremely gifted dancer who leaps from the realm of infinity into finitude in a seamless movement. This representation points to absurdity as a necessary source of strength and the ground of paradoxical possibilities for faith such as living contentedly in an unhappy world. Kierkegaard's stringent philosophical theology in *Practice in Christianity* (*PC*) informs Sections B and C of this chapter. There, we will see how Kierkegaard's insistence that authentic Christian life is shaped by double grace—the response to God's grace with grace—parallels the interplay of redeemability and intrinsically-valued activity (the latter, significantly, following the former as human follows divine grace). The willingness to invest effort in a project without turning it into a solidified "work"—to be strenuous in play and yet refrain from striving in it—is determined in part by a prior understanding of failure as fodder for creative destruction as well as a divesting of self. Whatever *I* do or fail to do is less important than the play itself. This may be expressed in more theological terms: Receiving salvation from God "for free" (*gratis*) grants a person the security to live amidst the difficult circumstances of life with both a tolerance for taking risks and the relative aplomb of inner peace. What Kierkegaard aspires to and the improvisatory version of play demonstrates is the joy of effort that is neither fully mandated nor consequential—effort that is, in a word, liberated.

I. INTRODUCING IMPROVISATION

A preliminary understanding of improvisation may be formed according to *where* it is said to take place. Indeed, for many, improvisation refers chiefly to the sphere of jazz. The possibility may be recognized that other areas such as comedy, acting, or dance are associated with improvisation but only in a way secondary to the connection shared with spontaneously created music. When improvisation is thought of, however, as a set of skills—a style—it is applicable to a wider range of fields.

A number of characterizations of the *what* of improvisation reappear across its specialized literature, not only in technical "how-to" guides and training manuals but also in theoretical investigations. Among these traits are freedom and spontaneity, which are frequently said to exist alongside or, more starkly, within formal structure and constraints; the notion of practice in the two-fold sense of discipline and ongoing exercise—an unfinished process that is therefore able to resist commodification; the method of doing (ordinary) things and accepting (all) offerings; the exercise of novelty and repetition; risk and responsibility; decision-making without delay; "relaxed awareness," captured by the French term *la disponibilité*; attentiveness; the careful listening and negotiation of power which accompany antiphony, or patterns of call and response; losses of (layers of) self and time;[174] and the ability to be surprised by accomplishing or experiencing things unknown or previously thought impossible. Various combinations of a variety of these aspects make up the improvisatory style not of a single arena but of an infinite domain.

---

[174] The qualification about losing *layers* of self is one made by the musician Vijay Iyer. Furthermore, Janet Walton makes the fine distinction between *losing* oneself and *giving* oneself away in play.

This view, which focuses on improvisation as a style, accords with a movement within improvisation studies that assesses it in the widest possible terms. Representative of this trend are Columbia's Professor of music George Lewis and the "Hadotian" expert at the University of Chicago Arnold Davidson. For them, *life* is the purview of improvisation. This goes some way in explaining how seemingly distinct areas such as couture and cooking may also be depicted easily as improvisational.[175] For my purposes, it is illustrative of the possibility of applying the values and characteristics of improvisation to different forms of play.

The standard texts on the practice and theory of improvisation appear to belong incontestably to Derek Bailey and Keith Johnstone. Instead of returning to the foundation that they laid, I will look to the work of figures from the second generation of improvisation scholars who have absorbed and engaged Bailey and Johnstone's ideas, specifically Danielle Goldman's *I Want to Be Ready: Improvised Dance as a Practice of Freedom* (2010) and Gary Peters's *The Philosophy of Improvisation* (2009).

To begin, then, in the upcoming section I will consider beautiful actions in movement—their conditions (such as disciplined training) and outcomes (which are sometimes paradoxical in nature). What Goldman contributes to this first exploration of grace are the issues of practice and power, readiness and responsiveness, and constraints and paradox, as they are exercised in the play of contact improvisation. Kierkegaard informs this discussion insofar as he portrays the knight of faith as a dancer

---

[175] Consider these commentaries with their prescient references to improvisation and dialectical opposition from a recent exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum. "Referring to his early training on Savile Row in London, he [Alexander McQueen] said, 'Everything I do is based on tailoring.' McQueen's approach to fashion, however, *combined the precision and traditions of tailoring and patternmaking with the spontaneity and improvisations of draping and dressmaking*—an approach that became more refined after his tenure as creative director of Givenchy in Paris from 1996 to 2001. It is this approach, *at once rigorous and impulsive, disciplined and unconstrained*, that underlies McQueen's singularity and inimitability." Further, the curator writes: "Like the Victorian Gothic, which combines elements of horror and romance, McQueen's collections often reflect opposites such as life and death, lightness and darkness. Indeed, the emotional intensity of his runway presentations was frequently the consequence of the interplay between *dialectical oppositions*. The relationship between victim and aggressor was especially apparent, particularly in his accessories" (Bolton, emphasis mine).

of unrivaled skill. Drawing on the strength of the absurd when he leaps into life, the knight of faith is in a position to accept, paradoxically and freely, what he had renounced. This is the trait that distinguishes him from the knight of infinite resignation. Taken together, the analysis and philosophy of Goldman and Kierkegaard lead to an idea of grace that bestows freedom relative to struggle and suffering.

II.A. IMPROVISATION CAN EMBODY THE GRACE OF OUTWARD EASE AND INWARD RIGOR

It is intuitive to rank the following two feats differently. The first to be considered is this: to perform something amazing—a sport's move, a gesture of forgiveness, an academic requirement, a videogame maneuver—all the while conveying (perhaps through one's body language or attitude) the difficulty of the difficult task. One senses the strain in the performer's clenched teeth—in her stumbling, in her complaints, in her sweat. The second form of accomplishment is to carry out a demand of equal proportion but in such a way that the performer, instead of revealing the rigor that the act requires, makes it look easy. At no time is the observer's attention diverted to thoughts of the hardness of the agent's task. No; when watching her, the possibility of the feat is simply taken for granted. And this it seems is part of the enjoyment of beholding her as she unleashes her skill. The audience does not have to worry about whether she will pull off the joke or make the point or finish the piece or remember the notes or clear the jump. The audience is given the sheer pleasure of seeing her make her movements and do what she is supremely gifted to do. The difference between these two achievements is something like the difference between the knight of infinite resignation and the knight of faith in *Fear and Trembling*.[176] The concealment of difficulty

---

[176] This distinction is starker in moral cases. It is less than magnanimous—less than gracious—to remind a person repeatedly of the effort of the act of kindness or forgiveness that one is undertaking. Showcasing instead of swallowing the difficulty of a sacrifice cancels some of its merit. There could be numerous examples of this but for one instance, picture a person who

in the latter knight's action is a mark of grace.[177] Let us therefore enter into a

consideration of the two figures, according to those terms of conjoined rigor and ease.

Who is the knight of faith and what is his place, generally, in *Fear and Trembling*?

Fear and Trembling is a sustained reflection on a life of complete faith in which

Kierkegaard's pseudonymous writer Johannes de Silentio shares his admiration for the

biblical patriarch Abraham, repeatedly declaring wonderment and even bemusement

over his greatness. In his meditation, de Silentio looks not only to Abraham's life

(though of course the father of faith is de Silentio's starting point) but also to the way of

life of the idealized knight of faith figure. The knight of faith takes pleasure in

everything, is a "participator"—taking part in everything, but the invisible mark of who

he is, his signature characteristic, is his reliance on the strength of the absurd in all he

does (39-40). The strength of the absurd is the "how" of his faith.[178]

A case for the greatness of this faith is built in part on a contrast with a lesser

individual, the knight of infinite resignation, whose life displays the gap between reality

and the ideal—if not quite in awkwardness, in difference and recognizability (38).[179]

Without taking himself to be the best, the knight of infinite resignation does distance

himself from the world and, above all, from the rank of the *bourgeois* philistine (ibid.).

---

makes her begrudging feelings known. This is the person who does not simply forgive—or help—others but who tells them in so many words, "I am forgiving you or helping you even though you don't deserve it and it is causing me difficulty." This contrasts the case of someone who does not want to make others feel beholden to her and so graciously "hides her help" in the manner Kierkegaard describes in *Works of Love*.

[177] It may also be linked to the knight of faith's incognito, degrees of concealment interrelating.

[178] "[F]or the movement of faith must continually be made by virtue of the absurd …" (37). References are to the Hongs' translation of *Fear and Trembling*, unless otherwise noted.

[179] To clarify, there are three camps of people represented in *Fear and Trembling*. The first group may be thought of as the masses, among whom there is neither striving nor resignation. The second group is made up of knights of infinite resignation. They represent an advance over the masses in that they "make an upward movement." But they are not able to reconcile infinity with finitude. And so this first class of knights is surpassed by the knights of faith, the third and greatest group. Such figures of faith embody the highest calling of existence in living before the Absolute in such a way that does not cancel their everyday being. Questionably, parallels hold between these different sets of people (the masses, the knights of infinite resignation, and the knights of faith) and the three stages of existence (the aesthetic, ethical, and religious).

Further, the knight of infinite resignation deals in escapism—in order to cope with his resignation, he flees to the realm of infinity and makes sure to scorn what he has left behind—whereas the knight of faith moves seamlessly between the two worlds. The knight of faith goes beyond resignation by making a second movement, the "movement of infinity." It is precisely this movement that allows Abraham to receive Isaac back *with joy* after the call to sacrifice him on Mount Moriah. And so de Silentio claims that the knight of faith makes the movement of infinity successfully by returning to the world in a particular way. He belongs to the Absolute but blends in with the everyday. On one level then, i.e., in the sense of outwardly fitting in with the crowd, he may even be said to go with the flow. Most importantly, whatever his relation with the infinity of the Absolute, he "does not lose the finite but gains it whole and intact" (37).

Wherever else the language of grace and graciousness may be thought to apply, movement is the special purview of the adjective "graceful." Movement moreover holds a significant place in de Silentio's account as his choice for expressing different ways of being in the world. Conceiving of faith as a double movement leads him to employ dance imagery. The knights, representative of the paradigms of effort and ease, metamorphose into ballet dancers of uneven skill in this "leap into life" passage:

> It is supposed to be the most difficult feat for a ballet dancer to leap into a specific posture in such a way that he never once strains for the posture but in the very leap assumes the posture. Perhaps there is no ballet dancer who can do it—but this knight does it. Most people live completely absorbed in worldly joys and sorrows; they are benchwarmers who do not take part in the dance. The knights of infinity are ballet dancers and have elevation. They make the upward movement and come down again, and this, too, is not an unhappy diversion and is not unlovely to see. But every time they come down, they are unable to assume the posture immediately, they waver for a moment, and this wavering shows that they are aliens in the world. It is more or less conspicuous according to their skill, but even the most skillful of these knights cannot hide this wavering. One does not need to see them in the air; one needs only to see them the instant they touch and have touched the earth—and then one recognizes them. But to be able to come down in such a way that instantaneously one seems to stand and to walk, to change the leap into life into walking, absolutely to express the sublime in the pedestrian—only that knight can do it, and this is the one and only marvel. (41)

The difference between the two kinds of knights is reflected in time. Unlike the knights of infinite resignation who do not assume the posture immediately, knights of faith walk instantaneously upon landing. It is the gap in time as much as the wavering of motion in their descent that betrays the identity of knights of infinite resignation. A close reading of this account may yield the surprising realization that the performances of the knights of infinite resignation are nevertheless admired as "not unlovely." De Silentio's concession to their skill does not erase the fact of their strain, however. In privileging the pedestrian (walking doubling as ordinariness), de Silentio retrains readers' focus from the beauty of the leap itself to the marvel of the fact that it is a leap *into life*. That knights of faith are connected to reality is evinced therefore in their touching the ground. There is grace in finding the sublime within the everyday, which is manifested by the absence of any vacillation in the higher knights' lowering movement.

What, aside from their differing relations with the absurd, accounts for the discrepancy in their landings? There is a brief but illuminative reference to *training* in a passage on the virtues and traits of the knight of faith. After describing a number of the ways that the knight of faith treads the line between seriousness and levity—he is "[c]arefree as a devil-may-care-good-for-nothing, he hasn't a worry in the world, and yet he purchases every moment that he lives, 'redeeming the seasonable time' at the dearest price," etc.—de Silentio explains the basis for the faithful person's ability to live paradoxically. He is able to enjoy living in the finite realm even after the pain of renouncing finitude

> *for his remaining in the finite bore no trace of a stunted, anxious training*, and still he has this sense of being secure to take pleasure in it, as though it were the most certain thing of all. … He resigned everything infinitely, and then took everything back on the strength of the absurd. He is continually making the movement of infinity, but *he makes it with such accuracy and poise* that he is continually getting finitude out of it, and not for a second would one suspect anything else. (Hannay, 69-70, emphasis mine)

Carefree and yet going about the business of redeeming time. Draining in deep sorrow and yet experiencing bliss. Renouncing the earthly and yet remaining in finitude. How

can the person of faith live in a state of simultaneous security and suspension? More than shedding light on the key to the knight of faith's paradoxical way of life, de Silentio's claim that there is no hint of *stunted, anxious training* underlying his movement reveals the source of the faithful knight's poise. De Silentio does not—cannot[180]—elaborate on the knight of faith's preparation. Nevertheless, this statement (in which he gestures toward the type of training) alone seems to offer significant clues to the knight of faith's superior movement. For one, it implies that stunted preparation leads to awkward performance, which further suggests that if there is no grace going in to his groundwork, there is no grace coming out of his play.

This pattern relates in striking ways to the dynamic of preparation and responsiveness in the art of contact (dance) improvisation. In addition to the practice of improvisation itself, which is a growing source of expertise for them, improvising dancers rely on a history of strenuous discipline in order to move well together in the course of performing. That affords them the readiness to respond in appropriate and inspiring ways to the shifting constraints they encounter onstage. In other words, it is how they become prepared to be unprepared. Graceful movement is not possible, therefore, without rigorous training (including the rigorous training of the time of play itself). As the ability to handle something difficult with poise, grace is also a power, a "practice of freedom." Paradoxically, such graceful power may be displayed in acts of surrender. This holds true in religion and politics as much as in the realm of aesthetic movement. Thus, instead of a protestor or dancer seeking to express control through vertical positions or motions that approximate flying, improvisation might call for willfully falling down. These are among the claims borne out by Danielle Goldman in *I Want to Be Ready*, a selection of ideas that we will now examine in full.

---

[180] That is why de Silentio continually marvels at this figure; at most, he is able to describe the movements of faith but he can neither perform those movements nor supply a formula for how to make them. See, for example, the swimming passage on pages 37-38.

A professional dancer and assistant professor of dance at The New School, Goldman moves comfortably between philosophical, political, and kinesthetic sources. Announcing the cross-sections of these fields in the introduction to her book, Goldman claims that recognizing—rather than denying—the role of constraints in improvisation allows one to see improvisation's "most significant power as a full-bodied critical engagement with the world, characterized by both flexibility and perpetual readiness" (5). Improvised dance is powerful as a practice that prepares one to make choices in response to constraints. Significantly, this includes constraints belonging to spheres apart from *but addressable by* dance, which is what allows Goldman to claim that improvisation is "critical engagement with the world."[181]

Rules and regulations are the most obvious form of constraint in play—they are the framing function of games, which demark them from everyday reality. Occasionally, a group of improvisers might set out to play within particular, known confines, giving themselves rules in advance (e.g., agreeing to play only certain chords during a jazz piece or to limit themselves to a certain tempo). But, in general, improvisational play operates by a shifting set of rules. Unlike the established confines of a pre-existing game, constraints in improvisation are liable to change as the conditions of a performance develop. Here, constraints might be the ever-building decisions of the other players or the atmosphere of the event. As Goldman acknowledges: "Acts of beholding can create the tightest kinds of spaces, and one would be remiss not to consider the contexts in which dancing occurs and the effects that different modes of spectatorship have upon one's ability to improvise" (88). Thus, beyond observers and their setting, interpretation of dance affects the possibilities of performance.

---

[181] This is supported by Bill T. Jones's statement "It was in an improvisation class taught by Richard Bull that I discovered that dance wasn't only about pointing my feet or making lines in space. It was about how I could solve problems" (cited in Goldman, 114).

Additionally, there are three different ways of viewing constraint that I wish to

suggest. Briefly, they are the constraints of self, society, and sin. First, if a player comes

to a performance with only slight training, she may feel unable to improvise adequately.

It is as if having learned fewer rules, she has less to break, or that without much practice

(experience), she is at a loss for what to practice (enact). This underdeveloped inner state

would limit the number of choices available to her during the piece. Secondly,

constraints might not be ludic or aesthetic but political and social. Bill T. Jones's story as

a black, gay choreographer conveys this demonstrably. Lastly, harkening back to the

religious and specifically Christian focus of this chapter, it is worth mentioning that sin

might be experienced as a constraining element—something that cuts one off

existentially from God and others. A valuable *technê*, then, for "remedying" constraints

of ranging type and consequence is readiness.

Like a solo from Alvin Ailey's signature piece, *Revelations*, Goldman names her

work after the black spiritual with the haunting but simple lyrics "I want to be ready, I

want to be ready, Lord, ready to put on my long white robe." It may not be immediately

clear to what the readiness in the song refers. A strong point is nevertheless being made.

Whether for baptism, death, judgement day, heaven, or some other encounter with God,

preparation is needed—and life ought to be lived differently in light of this need. One

garners a sense of the inspiration that Ailey's dance holds for Goldman not only in terms

of readiness but also relative to practice and paradoxical descent (or "controlled fall")

through her exposition:

> Although *Revelations*' falls are always followed by recovery, [the piece] "I Want
> to Be Ready" suggests the need to be prepared, not just for salvation but also for
> a range of social and historical constraints. *In this austere solo, with everything
> seemingly at stake, dance emerges as a practice of making oneself ready.* Long-limbed
> and dressed entirely in white, the soloist begins seated in fourth position, hands
> planted firmly on the floor, gazing upward. A series of stretches and contractions
> ensues, danced in keeping with the slow cadences of the spiritual … Several
> times, the man in white rises from the floor with arms outstretched, only to find
> the floor again in a controlled, expressive fall. The dance's final descent ends as
> the man dramatically reaches his right arm across the floor, head down. (104,
> emphasis mine)

This downward turn is the provisional, not final, end. The dance progresses; the next

and final section of *Revelations* culminates in the starkly celebrative movements of the

entire ensemble dancing, clad in bright yellow costumes. Ailey's piece concludes on a

triumphant note, suggesting that the preparation undergone in the second section was

worthwhile, successful. The message seems to be that falls can indeed lead to uplift or

victory. More immediately pertinent is Goldman's contention that dancing (in general) is

a practice of readying oneself.

Such an interpretation of the specific dance piece *Revelations* points to a form of

dance more broadly, one that relies on—while further cultivating—the art of perpetual

readiness, what I earlier referred to as the preparation for being unprepared.[182] In contact

improvisation—a way of dancing traced back in America to the 1970s in which physical

contact between dance partners provides a certain "communication" that then informs

choices of movement, leading especially to acts of lowering like rolling and falling—

dancers are responsive and responsible. They are responsible in that they owe each other

something in the spur of the moment choices they make as they respond to one another.

In other words, in their playful interactions, there is a mutual answerability. Such

accountability is a daunting objective. Having no time for reflection during the course of

improvisatory play, a dancer is forced to rely on attentiveness and her reserve of skills

from training to "rise" to its challenge.

To ascertain what responsiveness in improvisation entails, one may begin by

explaining what being prepared is not. According to Vijay Iyer, doing something

memorized or pre-planned is criticized as *giving a lie*. Slightly less offensive but still

significantly out of line with the spirit of improvising are the following gestures: on the

one hand, thinking of one's next action in the midst of a fellow player's "offering" and

---

[182] "At its core, contact improvisation is a practice of making oneself ready for a range of shifting
constraints" (Goldman, 97).

on the other, waiting for someone to finish solely so one can do what one wants to do. These false modes of preparation bring about a sort of absence and rudeness, which take a player out of the moment. While they may yield a reaction, they take one out of the current—out of the flow, out of the now—demonstrating how reactivity "falls short" of authentic responsiveness.[183] Ultimately, these strategies hinder the desired spontaneity of improvisation and block the freedom of the kind of exchange being sought.

The preparation that frees one to act from a place of the fresh and unplanned goes hand in hand with proper responsiveness. Such an accomplishment requires attentive listening—listening that is intuitive, bodily, and of an almost total sort.[184] When dancers let this way of listening determine their actions, they not only honor each other, demonstrating dutiful responsibility, they also create an atmosphere of *relaxed* awareness. "Relaxed awareness" is one translation for *disponibilité*, a notion used by Jacques Lecoq in training improvisers (Wells, 80). The virtue of *disponibilité* may also be explained in terms of availability, openness, and even trust. Great improvisation arises out of the willingness of the players to test possibilities, follow each other into and out of risks, and be comfortable enough to keep the play going after producing phrases in movement or music that do not "work out." In other words, successful improvisation depends on a responsiveness that results from awareness.

Note that the difficulty of this demand does not lead to rigidity but *relaxation*. Amidst focused attention, there is also dispersion. Where one expects to find tension, there is easing up. This coincidence of opposite or contradictory states occurs at a number of levels. Until this point, we have only noted the discrepancy between the exterior and the interior—grace disguising grit. Now we are led to see the unlikely

---

[183] This description is somewhat in tension with Gary Peters's origin-focused account of improvisation, which will be introduced shortly.

[184] On account of this skill, improvisers might be likened to other "professional listeners" such as psychotherapists. See also Mark Fuller's short interview on "The Improv Approach to Listening" and, for consideration of the theme's philosophical importance, Jean-Luc Nancy's *Listening.*

distance between easy outward appearance and difficult effect—passivity covering up power. The motion of falling makes this second level of paradox clear.

We have encountered the notion of falling vis-à-vis play in references to Heidegger's philosophy in which human beings, dropped into the world, exist as "thrown," and indirectly in Caillois's fourth play category of radical movement, *ilinx*. I do not know if there are theologians in the play movement who consider the Fall of humankind into sin in terms of play, although Robert E. Neale in "The Crucifixion as Play" does joke about the divine adventure, describing the incarnation as the result of a trip (Moltmann, *Theology of Play*, 80). In Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*, a leap becomes valuable when it is most like walking. Rather than striving to remain in the realm of infinity and difference, re-inhabiting the ordinary is what counts as extraordinary. And while this is not falling per se, it does occur when one's feet alight upon the ground. In other words, the important feature of the faithful person's leap concerns the downward-focused portion of his movement.

Falling arises again in Goldman's examination of the link between contact improvisation and political resistance. She pairs the seemingly different spheres of dance and the U.S. civil rights movement, informed as it was by Gandhi's peaceful revolution in India, on the basis of her understanding of improvisation as "the intimate awareness of constraints and the choices of how to respond to them" (Goldman, Union Theological Seminary presentation). Because political constraints call for improvisation, too, falling may be a social and spiritual exercise beyond a strategy in contact-driven, combinatorial movement. It may be a creative-yet-trained response to the unpredictable and physically fraught atmosphere of protests. Or, as the liturgical expert Janet Walton stated, falling may count in a particular context as an action but "really it's a stance in life" (U.T.S. course discussion). In what follows, I will briefly explore this paradoxical stance, first in the context of dance performances and then in the context of the struggle for civil rights.

The impetus to fall—to partner with gravity in moving downward rather than attempt to defy it by propelling oneself up in the air—is at odds with what one might call the kinesthetic values of classical ballet. Challenges to the tautness and verticality of that dance form came from a number of sources, including the modern choreography of the Nietzsche-inspired Doris Humphrey. And yet, as the transformation in value was taking place, falling was still being contrasted with "recovery," the former representative of submission, the latter, control. During the development of contact improvisation, which is captured in the documentary *Fall after Newton*, falling is seen to provide safety—even survival (Goldman, 101-106). It is as if freely accepting constraints is necessary to purchase freedom from them.[185]

The link between freedom, power (and control), paradox, and falling becomes clearer in the analysis of the cultural critic and music professor Jason King. King writes, "Black performance moves toward the co-presence of mobility and immobility, control and freedom. … Blackness is ambivalent direction, finding the fall in ascent, and the ascent in the fall. This is survival" ("Which Way is Down? Improvisations on Black Mobility," 42; Goldman, 100). This quotation suggests not only that freedom and control can coexist. It gestures towards the fruitfulness of locating freedom in paradox, whether that be the co-presence of mobility and stillness or of falling and ascent. In short, responses of paradox offer survival.[186] Civil rights activists tested this principle, putting their own bodies on the line.

The Freedom Riders deal explicitly in their training material, *A Manual for Direct Action*, not only with the action of standing up and looking their attackers in the eye but

---

[185] On this point, consider the implications of the fortitude of the slave Harriet Jacobs, who survived for seven years in an attic space seven feet wide, nine feet long, and no more than three feet tall. Receiving freedom by being bought did not represent escape for her. As Goldman, referring to a contemporary scholar, writes, "According to Moten, if Jacob's freedom could only come by way of exchange, she would need to escape from freedom too" (Goldman, 4).

[186] Lears's writing proves relevant once more for how it sheds light on the relation between paradox and survival. Lears points out that black Christians' perception of reconciling grace was a means for living with contradiction (*Something for Nothing*, 136-140).

also with the purposeful and protective value of stillness, immobility, and lying on the ground (Goldman, 97-98). Here Goldman's discussion is deft in that it treads the line of a certain ambivalence and recognizes the danger of "aestheticizing passivity." Improvisation involves negotiation between people, whether dancers, musicians, or teammates. In addition, it requires negotiation of meaning—in this case, whether to challenge, as Jason King does, the traditional associations of verticality with activism on the one hand, and of horizontality with apathy, on the other. He questions if there is dignity in standing up but shame in falling down. What if these old correlations are wrong and dignity could be found in forms of lowliness? (But would standing up ever be identified with shame?) What if "narratives of racial uplift" end in exhaustion? Instead might we, with King and Goldman, look at the informed activism of the Freedom Riders as *experimentations* that "recuperate 'falling' as having value in political struggle"? (Goldman, 100) Here I would argue that falling might even be viewed as an assertive act, a power play. Grace gives way not simply to survival but to force.[187]

Having seen that grace is the power one acquires through demanding training to respond in beautiful, seamless ways to unknown constraints, even or especially in paradoxical movements, let us pivot to the relation between grace, failure, destruction, and redeemability, elements that roughly correspond to the first half of "double grace."

---

[187] The underlying *resistance* to grace—in favor of force—in some instances of contact improvisation should not be overlooked. Nancy Stark Smith, one of contact improvisation's founders, expresses this in memorable language, stating that she finds herself "playing against the forces … insisting instead of yielding, adding fierce to gentle, no to yes" (Stark Smith, 91; Goldman, 107). This may be surprising because (at least for the untrained observer) contact improvisation can carry a rather smooth and graceful appearance with all of its relaxed limbs, flowing movement, and seeming weightlessness. Especially in the beginning stages of the dance form's development, however, resistance came in aggressive, "clunky collisions" between dancers (Goldman, 106). Such "jarring moments," which may still be caught in performances, are indicative of the negotiations underlying the practice. As Goldman explains, "These *breaks in flow* constitute the often ignored, but crucial, grit of contact improvisation. They serve as visible reminders, for those not actually dancing, that negotiations are taking place, even when the fall appears smooth and full of grace or when the bodies seem dangerously passive" (107, emphasis mine). Goldman exercises valuable nuance in analyzing improvisation. In short, her challenge to assumed characteristics of free play in dance allows us to see grit and grace together.

II.B. The First, Receptive Part of Double Grace concerns the Givenness of

Redemption and the Freedom to Fail

As indicated, the remaining sections of this chapter are oriented around the notion of *double grace*, or a person's application of grace in the acceptance of God's grace. *I would posit that, conceived in this way, grace results in an attitude and posture similar to playfulness in being neither wholly of work nor wholly of rest.* On the one hand, grace involves an active receptivity that is simultaneously grateful and sacrificial. On the other hand, grace requires an almost passive productivity in movements of reciprocation that are driven by sincerity and a lack of self-importance. In the remaining sections, I will explain these two senses of grace by drawing cursorily from Luther's Reformation theology alongside Kierkegaard's stance in *PC*. A description of the (1) receptive and (2) reciprocal aspects of grace (in addition to Peters's philosophical analysis of improvisation, of course) will provide the groundwork for understanding the productive capacity of failure. This, in turn, will lead to the culminating point of this chapter: an appreciation of the freedom of working-without-works. Improvisation and the Christian faith converge there, in that peculiarly ludic, in-between place.

Note how the ease-and-rigor thematic of Part II.A remains relevant here. Those conjoined values appear again in Parts II.B and II.C—*theologically*, in the acceptance of divine forgiveness and the exercise of difficult, "costly" obedience—as well as *playfully*, in the willingness to build improvisation on broken, salvaged things and the refusal to produce solidified, sellable works. Insofar as the *productivity* of creative destruction does not lead to *products* but to free works, the sense of paradox also recurs.

To begin, then: What does the first movement of grace—God towards us—entail and what does it allow? According to the New Testament, God gives people salvation as a gift, not on the basis of any good attribute we possess or any virtuous action we

perform but according to our need.[188] Grace in this sense springs from God's loving

kindness through the person of Jesus Christ, offering the benefit not only of an eternal

future of blessedness but also of a psychic liberty here on earth. It is only after

appreciating the justifying mercy of this gesture that Christians are able to live and

"work" appropriately, their motivations having been radically transformed and freed.

The first movement makes possible the second, a pattern that parallels, however

imprecisely, the resignation and reappropriation (or crucifixion and resurrection) steps

of the double movement in *Fear and Trembling*.

Marked by a strong sentiment of the receptivity of grace, Lutheran theology rests

on the dialectical interplay of faith and free works, while opposing belief and "works of

the flesh." Works of the flesh—or acts that a Christian believer does in her own strength

for her own sake—may be said to be non-working works. Let us be clear to separate the

idea of non-working works from the working-without-works that Peters describes. The

self-motivated behaviors and deeds that Luther decries are not effective for bringing

about salvation;[189] as he himself experienced before relying on scripture and the record

of Christ, those works fail to produce the ease of grace and result in torment instead.

When there was no grace going into his groundwork, there was no grace coming out of

his play.

Rather than in any outer works, then, Luther locates the justification of

Christians in their inner spirit of faith. It is faith that connects them to Christ, Christ's

righteousness, the power of the word of God, and only then to outer works of a

reformed kind. Accordingly, he writes in "The Freedom of a Christian," "[t]hat which is

impossible for you to accomplish by trying to fulfill all the works of the law—many and

useless as they all are—you will accomplish quickly and easily through faith"

---

[188] See, for example, Romans 3:24-26, 5:1-ff, and Titus 3:5.

[189] For example, Luther states, "Though you were nothing but good works from the soles of your feet to the crown of your head, you would still not be righteous …" (Hillerbrand, 42).

(Hillerbrand, 38). Significantly, Luther only reached the ease of faith after going through the immense difficulty of trying to carry out the law by himself as he strained to be a perfect monk.[190] Thus, while justification by faith does not result *from* striving, it may arrive *after* striving. And for those who have attempted to make atonement for themselves, there is a special liberation to be had in comprehending the efficacy of divine grace alone. That there is assurance of rightness with God is surprising and transformative. That, because of the richness of God's character, it comes for free is beyond marvel and a source of unending joy.

Luther conveys the receptive nature of this process famously through the phrase "passive righteousness." Thus, in his "Commentary on St. Paul's Epistle to the Galatians" he states "the righteousness of faith, which God imputes to us through Christ without works … is a merely passive righteousness … For here we work nothing, render nothing to God; we receive and permit someone else to work in us, namely, God" (Hillerbrand, 125). The emotional relief and inner comfort that this brings is enormous. Without preventing a believer from ever failing, it frees her from feeling the condemnation of failure. Grace becomes a place where "one notices no sin and feels no terror or remorse of conscience" (129). It is not that failure does not matter in the Christian life but rather that God in Christ has created the conditions for failure to be treated differently, for sin to be countered by God's own perfect righteousness. Not incidentally, this ensures a perpetual indebtedness on the part of the Christian. Because salvation cannot be purchased with a person's good works, no one will ever be in the position to make a claim on God as owing her something. As will be discussed in Part II.C, Kierkegaard focuses on this other half of the story, that of the nature of the effort of responding to the gracious work of God.

---

[190] Such a tack is doomed to failure and is insulting to God. "Trying to merit grace by preceding works, therefore, is trying to placate God with sins, which is nothing but heaping sins upon sins, making fun of God, and provoking His wrath" (Hillerbrand, 134-135).

Thus far, I have been arguing that Luther's theology provides an understanding of grace as a resource for handling failure. Grace is the God-given, future-directed gift that enables us to live beyond sin and into eternal blessedness. In what follows, I will present some ways in which failure is encountered and remedied in the realm of improvisation, in particular by looking at how failure relates positively to the issues of origin, destruction, and renovation. Broaching failure in this way will allow us to see grace differently—as the liberation *of* self, *for* play.

Gary Peters, professor of critical and cultural theory at York St. John University, orients his superb study *The Philosophy of Improvisation* around the notion of origin. This is a significant departure from the ordinary association of improvisation with "flow." Consciously following Paul Klee's angel and Walter Benjamin's storm of progress, Peters looks backward. Rather than glorifying the immediacy of "now-time" or making an ode to some future hope, he locates his task in the past and focuses on the import of origins and their relation to freedom. These are the terms in which he describes his book's resistance, its push to "re-novation," in discussing what others often sentimentalize. Therefore, although it is "situated on this edge between the absence and the presence of the work," his theoretical writing on improvisation is offered "not, it should be emphasized, in order to take up residence in the *now*, the 'being in the moment' so celebrated by improvisors, but as a way of bringing into view the prehistory of the work, thought in terms of its origin and the aesthetic process of origination" (1, original emphasis). A major concern for Peters, then, is the tragedy of creation—how to respond to the destruction that accompanies experiences of improvisation while seeking to preserve the freedom of the beginning (3).[191]

---

[191] Peters elaborates: "Improvisors too rush forward into the future with their faces turned to the rubbish heap of the past, but the difference—the existential tragedy—is that they feel compelled to gather up this past and carry it into the future as a work of art. Free-improvisation gathers the past as an otherness not to be imitated but as the originary site of an aesthetic freedom to be sensed and followed. Weighed down by the scrap heap of history, by dead styles and wrecked idioms, free-improvisors are happy to contribute to this ongoing destruction through an active forgetfulness that clears the site for the beginning of new work out of nowhere" (48).

The potential of improvisation for "creative destruction" is so strong that it applies to literal garbage: even the destroyed and ruined materials of trash heaps may be redeemed, as Peters illustrates in "Scrap Yard Challenge—Junkyard Wars." The chapter's title refers to British and American television programs that take place at garbage sites in which competing teams are challenged to use only the discarded things there in order to produce an odd array of working artifacts (10). Peters acknowledges the severe material constraints of the pieces of junk. Insisting that such decay *not* be *transcended* in being treated improvisatorially, he takes the view that improvisation requires the players to inhabit the decay in a revivifying way. Thus, he arrives at an estimation of improvisation as re-novation by considering it "a productive process of reappropriation that promotes improvisation more as a means of salvation and redemption than of creation" (18). I want to suggest that this reappropriation—this salvaging—is of a kind with the redemptive activity of God in the world.[192] Redeeming mistakes and fallen lives reveals a special ability, a *power*, similar to the power of grace that appears among dancers who practice contact improvisation in challenging times and constraining spaces.

What happens, though, when improvisers face offerings of unknown quality, when the exchanges improvisers make occur not in a setting of clearly identified junk but in an atmosphere of emerging context? There (in a musical performance, e.g.), redemption may appear as the strengthening of an already good invention but it is more likely to bring about the positive transformation of a neutral creation. It would relate to what I think of as the "accidental value" component of spontaneity-driven play, an idea that may be broached in conjunction with the procedure of "overaccepting" familiar to many improvisers.

---

[192] In this, I am in agreement with Sam Wells, the author of *Improvisation: The Drama of Christian Ethics*.

We have already discussed the heightened state of readiness that improvisers embody in being prepared to be unprepared. Equipped to do many things but not knowing what exact thing she will make or do, a player is open to both chance and accident when she steps into an improvisational framework. This accounts for the necessarily contingent value of initial play offerings. If specific preparation were allowed, players would arrive with beautiful, well-crafted compositions in hand but then the improvisational character of the event would itself be destroyed.

Therefore, a *commitment* to accident (rather than the accident itself) is what is partially determinative of the excellence of improvisatory acts. It is not so much the quality manifested by the initial offering itself that matters but what is done with it—whether the offering is committed to. This "commitment" may be described in the language of improv 101 as the practice of overaccepting (the "Yes … and" technique), which includes integrating mistakes into an unfolding work. Overaccepting is distinguished from ordinary accepting in its active character. Rather than passively taking something entirely on someone else's terms, a player who practices overaccepting exerts power by shaping the other's offering as she receives it. Forward movement is stalled if a choice (whether good, bad, or neutral) is ignored or rejected in an outright fashion. "Blocking" offerings would bring play to a halt, leading to a series of stunted, short segments. Not giving each other enough time to explore and develop improvisatory lines would prevent great moments from emerging. Perhaps counter-intuitively, accepting some merely-okay thing by following through on it may prove redemptive. This holds in improvisational art forms and, to a degree, in life.[193]

To give an example: in a blues song with the typical AAB line structure, the first line "A" that someone spontaneously throws out into the improvisatory arena may be

---

[193] There is an important but obvious ethical qualification to be made here. Creatively working around poor life decisions may transform them into something of surprising value, but this does not imply that the initial decisions need to be repeated, as in some artistic improvisation methodologies.

quite weak on its own. Alternately, it may be considered as something of a merely neutral quality until it is engaged—insofar as it is what follows that determines its merit or significance. That is, the line can *become* impressive and gain artistic meaning simply by being committed to. Repetition is a sign of this acceptance *and* a means of improving. In playing the less than stellar line a second time, the players announce a willingness to build their play around that accidental choice and to strengthen it by investing further creativity in it. All of a sudden, it gains in aesthetic value. The confirmation of the line "A" lays the path for further surprises, enabling additional turns, which are potentially deeply gratifying, to emerge. This is how it links to novelty, how it even opens up the path to difference. When an alternate line (line "B") is grafted onto it (the "A-A" string), the song begins to take shape. Other layers are weaved around the initial offering as the play continues. More choices are made, taken up, and repeated.

Repetition does not allow for sentimentalism, however. When a group of players (such as actors, musicians, dancers, or comedians) reach a collective place of excellence, when they have a moment of achievement, they must resist the temptation to recreate it. They must be relentless in moving forward to producing new things, allowing to emerge acts or sounds or interactions that build on the direction of the current energy of the performance and, thus, that are "true" or appropriate to the new moment. Improvisational offerings, even excellent ones, are not safe from the spirit of creative destruction on which Peters focuses. Thus, in improvisation, there are contradictory impulses towards and away from repetition. On the one hand, repetition is resisted insofar as it is in tension with novelty, energy-bestowing risk, and the value that improvisers place on authentic responsiveness. On the other hand, repetition solidifies and even "makes good on" first offerings. Repetition can be a tool for the determination of accidental value.[194]

---

[194] Repetition is a vital notion to this dissertation, at least indirectly by virtue of its relation to mimesis (a category in Roger Caillois's four-fold schematization of play). With respect to this

Despite idealized portraits, playing is not all acceptance, all the time. As Peters makes clear, there is a spectrum of combativeness and interpersonal care along which performances of improvisation occur. There is challenging, posturing, and assertion (51, 53).[195] At the end, after chaos and coherence have mixed, there may be peace—a freedom-infused moment of stillness before the new round is taken up—but along the way there is struggle (36). Improvisation is a practice of contestation.[196]

This combativeness relates in crucial but not immediately apparent ways to "good failure" and the grace that allows play to continue. The push and pull between

---

chapter, its importance appears doubly, in improvisational and liturgical contexts. In a different project, it would be stimulating to undertake the presentation of philosophical concepts of repetition by way of repetition's role in improvisation. For example, one might choose to consider the notion's recurrence in the writings of Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Freud, Derrida, and Deleuze, where it is found in the ideas of the distinction between religious repetition and poetic reproduction; eternal recurrence; the pleasure of repetition and its usefulness for attaining mastery over the painful; iterability; and the interplay between repetition and difference. What might be gained by reading their philosophies in light of improvisational understandings of repetition? One might wish to bring to bear the experience of "being in the groove," which refers to the way that the "dominant feel of a piece" comes about by repeating a rhythm pattern ("Jazz Glossary," http://ccnmtl.columbia.edu/projects/jazzglossary/).

[195] "There is an idealism in improvisation that is heart-warming but misguided. The terminology that inhabits and informs the hegemonic dialogical language of care, enabling, sharing, and participation is only aesthetically productive to the extent that it confronts the far from ideal reality of the work, where the necessity of singularity plays havoc with any dreams of universal consensus" (Peters, 50).

[196] There are *interior* challenges to improvisation, features of improvisatory play that undercut the extent or undermine the actuality of improvisation within the performance, too. Stabilization counts as one such problem. While much may be "up for grabs" in jazz, a certain underlying structure has come to be known, expected, secure, safe. Thus, Adorno—seen as a foe of popular art forms, including jazz—uses the "standardization of the framework" of jazz to criticize its pseudo-individualization (Peters, 78). Similar to the early and fast codification of movement in contact improvisation (Goldman, 106), the normalization of schemes in jazz bespeaks a threat to intrinsic spontaneity—spontaneity that goes "all the way down"—from within. How, then, can improvisation *in* practice resist the temptation to rigidify *through* practice? Put differently, as improvisation continues, how can it continue to be improvisation? Keith Johnstone offers one solution in an argument for the rigorous incorporation of destabilization into it, what he refers to, wonderfully, as "tilting." Peters presents this idea at length, as follows: "Johnstone devotes much time and space to the art of *tilting*, that is, of tilting the balance that is ever in danger of being achieved in an improvisation, by introducing destabilizing material into the emergent dialogue, thereby 'demolishing' or 'devastating' it [*Impro for Storytellers*, 94]. Tilting is a highly competitive sport, pitting one performer against another in a struggle for power that results in winners and losers, success and failure, but as is clear throughout, Johnstone is not interested in personalities, only in the work" (Peters, 59, original emphasis). The destabilizing effect of tilting is noteworthy for how it accords with Peters's interests in destruction and power negotiation, all of which exist in the service of improvis*ing*.

power and freedom introduces a significant dynamism into improvisation, a competitive destabilization that takes the focus off of the individual players and, according to Peters, redirects their interests to the origin of their work of art. In addition to being a site of destruction out of which novelty may be coaxed, then, failure is a crucial element of improvisation because it provides improvisers the opportunity to value play above themselves.

Peters develops these claims by drawing on and engaging the techniques of Keith Johnstone, the founder of Theatresports and author of *Impro: Improvisation and the Theatre*. In his work training improvisers and putting on shows of improvisational competition, Johnstone *depersonalizes* the players' experiences of fear, power loss, and success. "It is the shifting of the balance of power that is crucial, not who has it. It is the possibility of failure or success that gives improvisation its edge rather than who succeeds or fails," to quote Peters's analysis (59). By valuing "the happening of the artwork" more than any one person or personality, the improvisation expert and troupe leader spurs on a form of play that is both gracious and anticipatory. Referring to and building on Johnstone's writing, which contains the language of grace, Peters states:

> To fail "gracefully" is to fail successfully. It is to recognize that such failure is necessary for the work to continue. Such failure is liberatory in two ways but also tragic on account of this very dualism. The sacrifice of performers is a necessary part of the work's happening (for Johnstone, the avoidance of boredom), but this failure liberates the artist from the task of trying to gather and hold together both the origin and the event or performance of the work within the temporality of aesthetic production: the duality of creation and preservation. And the artist *needs* to be liberated from this task in order to fully recognize its impossibility and, thus, its significance. In this sense such liberation might be best understood as an emancipation from the illusions of success that, in their foregrounding of the artist, obscure and trivialize the origin of the work of art. The liberation of the artist releases, in turn, the artwork from the gathering grasp of the singular artist, allowing it to return to its origin, which continues to happen as the singularity of production ebbs and flows. It is the liberation of the artwork from the cramped intentionality of the singular artist that ensures the continuing presence of the origin in the unfolding of the work, and it is the graceful failure of the artist that is required to keep this origin in play. To fail without grace is to lose sight of the origin, obscured or displaced by the success of the work. (60-61, original emphasis)

If for Johnstone the highest commitment is to keeping the play going, the preeminent consideration for Peters as these lines evince is the continuing presence of the origin as the work of improvisation unfolds. Everything seems to flow for Peters from the distinction between the *concealment* and the *presencing* of the origin (the Heideggerean references being explicit for him). Under the negative or undesirable side of the dichotomy (i.e., the side related to concealment) would fall the individual artist along with intentionality and what I will refer to as "plain success" (versus Peters's version of the success of failure). Their venerable contrasts, which are indicative of the ongoing presencing of the origin, include the following: not artwork *tout simple* but artwork-and-artist-in-coemergence; the impossibility of the dual performance of creativity and preservation; and successful failure—i.e., graceful failure.

Failure and success might get tangled in an interpretation of this passage, so it is important to be clear. Failure, not plain success, is the friend of play. This is because success hinders the proper continuing of play by drawing attention to the player ("the singular artist") over and above the origin. Failure rises above plain success in Peters's estimation because failure denies the illusion that the artist could ever hold the origin and the ongoing event of art together. But there are two, fundamentally different kinds of failure, failure that is graceful and not. Not surprisingly, the relation to origin is determinative of this status. Peters privileges graceful failure because it "keeps [the] origin in play." It does this by releasing the *artwork*—not the artist—from being "cramped" (it is the artist, after all, who is failing). This is the manner in which Peters, by way of Johnstone, introduces grace to improvisation.[197]

In sum, therefore, I have sought in Part II.B to illuminate how grace is the religious principle of the givenness of redemption, which finds expression in improvisation in players' prizing of play over product, that is, in their affirmation that

---

[197] This account of failure that is successful and graceful may parallel the mystics' winning surrender in Hugo Rahner's *Man at Play*.

"the play's the thing." It is not that all improvisation has a graceful sheen; very often, the discomfort (and thrill) that one senses in watching an improvised performance is the keen awareness that the players might not "pull it off." What they do is hard. Routinely that difficulty is not disguised, cases of contact improvising aside. I would wager to say that where grace appears in improvisation in general is in the attitude towards risk. In short, there is freedom to fail. The assurance of redemption, salvability, is the ground of this freedom. An overall sense of security paradoxically spurs dangerous choices and chanciness. These issues not only relate to freedom but also extend to *work* in the following, colloquial manner.

During improvisation, attempts at creativity might not "work out." In addition to being thoroughly permissible and expected, this is even necessary for novelty. Knowing ahead of time that any improvisatory line or offering can be saved (in the sense of being salvaged, not preserved) does not lead to laziness. Instead, it allows the players to keep the play going long enough to benefit from their risks and failures. Paradoxically, it is this order of value—play over product—that enables the creation of groundbreaking art. This pattern parallels what I understand Kierkegaard and other Christian theological thinkers to have maintained about Christianity as a strenuous but unstriving faith. Christ's once-and-for-all success—which came, not incidentally, through loss—provides the believer's model for existence, while at the same time covering all past and future failures.[198] Rather than having the goal of accomplishing any one thing, the Christian's overriding commitment is to remaining in Christ and continuing the journey towards conformity to him—keeping the freely productive play of faith going (John 15:4-10; Romans 8:29).

---

[198] Johannes Climacus goes so far as to say that God "in his resolution" is "now obliged to continue" in his venture, as if a player no less than God is committed to keeping the play going (*Philosophical Fragments*, 55). Climacus's remark has implications, additionally, for the improvisation or play thematic of constraint.

In Part II.A of this chapter, we examined grace as strenuous but poised movement. Here in Part II.B, another picture has emerged in which the receptivity of grace foreshadows its responsive moment. Having broached the first "receptive" element of grace as the gift God bestows in redeeming mortal failure, and the corollary attitudes toward failure in improvisation that led to a privileging of play over product, let us now turn to Part II.C. There we will consider the sequentially second, "responsive" half of double grace, i.e., the identification of grace as free works. The theological conception of grace as free works finds a parallel in the definition of improvisation as "working without a work." Both exhibit freedom by pointing to the pleasure of intrinsically-motivated actions.

II.C. THE SECOND, RESPONSIVE PART OF DOUBLE GRACE CONCERNS THE FREEDOM OF PLAY THAT TAKES PLACE ON THE BORDER OF WORK

With hints of perhaps characteristic cantankerousness, Kierkegaard rails against the misuse of grace under the pseudonym Anti-Climacus in *Practice in Christianity*. In that book, which one ought to note Kierkegaard considered "the most perfect and truest thing" he wrote, there are few direct references to grace, keeping perhaps with his intent focus on restoring the difficulty of Christianity to Christendom (Hong, *PC*, xviii). The first appearance of the word in the Editor's Preface takes on particular, if not unquestionable, significance.[199] On the book's opening page—signed with the transparent initials "S.K."—there are these lines:

> In this book, originating in the year 1848, the requirement for being a Christian is forced up by the pseudonymous author to a supreme ideality.
> Yet the requirement should indeed be stated, presented, and heard. From the Christian point of view, there ought to be no scaling down of the

---

[199] Kierkegaard "all but revoked" the preface some years later in an article in *The Fatherland* (Possen, 162).

> requirement, nor suppression of it—instead of a personal admission and confession.
>
> The requirement should be heard—and I understand what is said as spoken to me alone—so that I might learn not only to resort to *grace* but to resort to it in relation to the use of *grace*. (7, original emphasis)

This editorial note orients readers of *PC* to expect a book on rigor and ideality from the start. Rather than be scaled down in any way, the requirement of what it means to lead a Christian life is *raised*—"forced up … to a supreme ideality." Recourse to God's grace provides no way out from the difficulty—and voluntary suffering—of a truly Christian existence. In his pure, idealized Christianity, Kierkegaard bars ho-hum "all is grace, all is forgiven" attitudes. Such escape hatches from Christian discipline, decision, and self-denial tarnish faith, cancelling its authenticity.

Counterbalancing Luther's emphasis on the passivity of righteousness is the conviction that God's grace does not preclude human works. While not dependent on good works, salvation nevertheless involves working, but working of a peculiar sort and timing. This is what it means to respond to God's grace with grace: to refuse to take God's work for granted by living a spiritually lazy and morally-lax life, and, at the same time, to spurn the opposite inclination toward a life of overwork with its accompanying mentality of "works-righteousness" and boasting. Double grace is therefore a middle way. Having an attitude of grace towards God's grace leads to a rigorous way of being in which one's actions are regarded as tremendously important but nevertheless non-salvific. They are meaningful actions but they are free because they do not proceed from the necessity of attaining salvation for oneself. Failure is possible because success in the most important things is assured, having already been secured externally by God. As much as an improviser's, then, an authentic Christian's deeds are non-working works. Restated, having an attitude of grace towards God's grace is the twofold realization that in the economy of salvation, it is only God's work that matters, and that in respecting God's "major," salvific work, one is called to a life of good, "minor" works that are free in their relative smallness.

Such a view of double grace accords with the dual claims of the Apostle Paul in Ephesians 2:8-10. There, he states clearly that salvation is the gift of God (*theou to dôron*), that salvation is not of works (*ouk ek ergôn*), and that followers of God are *God's workmanship* (*poiêma*, obliquely related to "poetry"). In repairing humanity and shaping individuals' character, God shows up as a worker as much as God appears in Genesis as a gardener and in Matthew and Mark as a carpenter. Additionally, Paul says—as if in the same breath—that good works (*ergois agathois*) are the "for the sake of which" of this salvation. God works *not* so that we do not have to but so that our (moral and spiritual) works are performed *differently*, oriented towards goodness instead of boastful and ill-conceived attempts at self-reliance. It is God's work alone that is necessary and sufficient for opening eternal blessedness to sinful, despairing human beings.

A seeming inevitability in offering a theory of play is grappling with the status of play vis-à-vis work—not only the extent to which play involves work or feels like work, but also the possibility that play *is* work (which means, not incidentally, that work might be play). This becomes somewhat clearer against the backdrop of the idea of rest. For, even though play involves relaxation and relates to "leisure," common language usage shows that "rest" connotes a passiveness generally unknown to play. In its best forms, play might prove to be restorative, but it is nevertheless active.

When it comes to the arts, there is a similar uncertainty surrounding the boundary lines that would separate the work world from the domain of play. One plays an instrument or puts on a play in the theater, but one also creates art*works*. Peters indirectly points to this problematic delineation between the two spheres when he discusses the fear that is wrapped up in the practice of improvisation and the discomfort that is found in audiences where improvisation is performed. His suggestion is that consumers of art unconsciously take comfort in the settled nature of pieces deemed "great works." Such masterpieces are missing, as if by definition, from the arena of free-

improvisation (the exemplary form for him). This is not to say that splendid beauty is

not produced in free-improvisation. Rather, it indicates that free-improvisation

deliberately refrains from generating stable products. Thus, Peters writes of the threats

of contingency and disappearance:

> Instead of art simply being there, improvisation renders it questionable, insecure, contingent, and endangered. Representing, along with the performers, the 'standpoint of the other' necessary for an improvisation to attain the intensity necessary to begin, the audience is here denied the all-too-familiar pleasures of the known and forced instead to witness close up not only the contingency of the artwork's occurrence but also the uncertainty of its continuance, the contestation of its identity, and its eventual destruction at the hands of the improvisors. (45)

It is noteworthy that the terminology of play is absent from Peters's analysis. A sense of

effort reigns here—the improvisers' effort to harness the intensity needed to begin, the

audience's effort to face up to the insecurity of art-in-process. The question, I suppose, is

whether a spirit of work prevails wherever there is so much effort. Are the two (work

and effort) linked by definition? Or, conversely, can we account for play that is effortful

but nevertheless not laborious, strenuous but unstriving? Does the same go for faith?

What keeps the work of believing (à la the Gospel of John) out of the territory of works

righteousness?[200]

    There is a third position, an in-between option introduced by Kant's theory of

inner-teleology, which allows improvisation both to involve tremendous amounts of

work and to remain distinct from work at once. Peters refers to the famed idea from

Kant's *Critique of Judgement* explicitly. He builds upon it, innovatively twisting its

terminology to fit his discursive context of the spontaneous and insecure art form that

improvisation is. He writes: "The peculiarity of free-improvisation is that it does not

produce works. To echo Kant's description of art as 'purposiveness without a purpose,'

it is a working without a work; indeed, in certain respects it might be considered a

---

[200] John 6:28-29 introduces the possibility that in place of striving is the work of belief: "Then they said to him, 'What must we do to perform the works of God?' Jesus answered them, 'This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.'" However, many Christians look to grace additionally for the source of faith.

working to *avoid* works" (44-45, original emphasis). This prescient quotation raises a number of points that ought to be included in a theory of the essence of play as well as in an analysis of improvisation as a powerful style of play. Among the matters for discussion are (1) the distinction between work and works; (2) the relation between work and purpose (an added layer to the understanding of the relation between work and effort, already cited); and (3) consideration of the market value of enduring pieces of art (the great masterpieces that can be bought and sold, and can hang on museum walls) in contrast to the way that art that fades away before a live audience can be commoditized (the play that players themselves dissolve in the course of improvisation).

Let us begin, then, with the different implications of the verb "work" (as in "The artists work") and the noun "work" or "works" (as in "The artists produce works of art"). Peters relies on this separation, allowing improvisation to count as work while denying that works belong to improvisation as an outcome. One way to explore the viability of this verb-noun splitting is to test the substitutability of the words "work" and "play." Are these formulas feasible: "The artists play and that results in the creation of works" and "The artists work and that results in the creation of play"? If Peters is right that it is possible to work in such a way as to produce play in place of works, the latter example holds. If he is wrong and the activity of working cannot turn out the object of play, if there is a sort of purity of categories where play only leads to play and work only leads to work, then neither of the statements is sensible. Rather than belabor the point, I will move to the next issue at hand, the interplay of work and purpose.

Secondly, it is necessary to ask about the role of purpose in parsing out the distinction between work and play. As soon as play is purposeful, does it transmute into work? And is it purpose itself that makes the difference or does the type of purpose— internal or external—matter? For, play is not without purpose. Rather, it is its own purpose. As Kant says of beauty, it has a formal purposiveness. Otherwise, it is disinterested and non-useful, hence without purpose. So perhaps the way to tackle the

issue of the relation of play, work, and purpose is not to ask whether purpose turns play into work but whether it is ever possible for work to be inner-teleological and still be work: Does a lack of outward-directedness cause work to become play? It seems there are people who find their professions so aligned with their passions that they would perform them with or without compensation. Perhaps this is what "vocation" in a strong sense would mean.

The third point of consideration here deals with the market value of improvisation and the bearing that has for its nature as playful or not. When improvisation takes place before a paying audience, has it turned into a commoditized object? In short, can play transcend payment? Interestingly, the very claim that Peters is wanting to make—that improvisers work in such a way as to refrain from producing works—does not preclude the possibility of earning wages for improvisation. It is oddly consistent that an improviser should be able to produce a non-work (a creation accompanied by destruction, a fleeting experience), and still get paid. That is, the *instability* of the art in no way interferes with its monetization. The question being considered is whether a spirit of play can still survive—and in its strongest, "purest" form—in a monetized atmosphere. So, to be redundant or clarifying, the issue we are investigating is not the relation between an unstable expression of art and payment but the connection between payment and play.

Payment for improvisation is consistent with the financial transactions surrounding the transmission of art in other contexts, such as museums and theaters, which exist in support of (relatively) stable masterpieces. A person may spend an afternoon at the Metropolitan and see enduring pieces of art or attend a performance of classical theater, celebrated for its lines composed (centuries) in advance, but in both cases—*as with improvisation*—she does not leave with a tangible object but with the memory of an experience. The crucial difference, of course, is that what takes place in the theater can be scripted and the objects for viewing in museums are mostly "finished"

prior to the exhibition, which is precisely what improvisation in its multitude of forms resists.

According to Peters's comments, it seems clear that improvisation is firmly planted in the category of work even in the absence of works. And so for Peters there is no contradiction when it comes to payment because work entitles one to wages. Is there a way, though, for play to prevail amongst work? Peters has led us to the question but in order that we may consider it more fruitfully, it behooves us to turn to texts that take religion—not improvisation—as their subject matter. Theology splices itself into our discussion.

Particularly helpful insight on riding the edge between play and work is offered by Walter Ong, the Jesuit thinker eventually known for his scholarship on orality. In his preface to Hugo Rahner's *Man at Play*, he suggests a way to understand the paradox of professional play. Ong points out that a dichotomy between play and work exists, *but only up to a point*.

> This is the way it is [that work is not play and play is not work] *until you arrive at a peak situation, when suddenly everything is reversed*: the best players in any game turn out to be the professionals, those for whom the game is in fact work, a means of livelihood, and the best workers in any field are those for whom their work is a kind of play—the mechanic whose job serves his desire to 'tinker' with machines, the basic research engineer who is 'playing around' with various possibilities for a huge industrial complex, the financier who 'plays the market,' the philosopher who likes to 'play' with ideas. (x, emphasis mine)[201]

The dialectical reversal, which Ong describes here, is of enormous import and connects precisely to the juncture of work and non-work that Peters presents in *The Philosophy of Improvisation*. For, it explains the possibility of working as a player and, conversely, playing as a worker. While I would like to bring Ong's notion of the coinciding of play and work "at the peak" into conversation with the "from below" perspective of the contemporary Christian writer Joerg Rieger's work on economic justice, I will begin by

---

[201] Cf. Matthew Crawford, *Shop Class as Soul Craft: An Inquiry Into the Value of Work* (2009).

seeking to draw out Ong's insight alone. I will do this by focusing on two phrases from the above quotation: "means of livelihood" and, two clauses later, "serves his desire."

Part of the odd reversal that one finds at the upper echelons of play and work is that play becomes a means and work becomes, if not an end in itself, intricately tied to what is inherently meaningful. Ong affords us insight into this transformation by indicating that once the best players get paid, their play turns into their *means* of livelihood. What is fascinating is that at this point of transition into playing-as-profession, play is still not quite extrinsically purposeful. Rather, the payment comes as a kind of tribute to excellence. The players—or, keeping Peters in mind, improvisers—have reached such a level of skill from which others benefit that it becomes necessary to recognize their talent as deserving of reward. Nowadays, the most common form for that recognition is monetary compensation, which is why fans and audience members pay money to attend sporting events or live concerts. But for the players, during the beginning of their professionalization, play remains "without why." However, I would like to add that their play is very much in danger of becoming purposeful and slipping out of the spirit of play the longer it serves as a source of income for them. Over time, it is more likely to take on the burden of work, of duty. This seems somewhat intuitive. Children do not begin playing—an instrument, a sport—as a career move. They do it for the love it, which sustains them over the difficulties of discipline and training. When the prize money comes, it is simply there, but if it lingers it is susceptible to becoming inseparable from the play and finally, perhaps, desirable apart from the play. I do not know how hard it is to maintain that love for the game when it becomes associated over greater lengths of time with paychecks. There is no prescribed way to deal with the "means of livelihood" phenomenon—short of giving away the money? Or not accepting it to begin with?[202]—but the world would be a poorer place if the risk of drowning out

---

[202] Bill Cunningham expresses his views on this (paid play) conundrum in a comment captured in the documentary on his fashion photography. He says, "You see, if you don't take money, they

the spirit of play in professionalism deterred the exceptionally talented from taking on their passions in play-based careers.

As Ong's comments switch from play to work, the direction of the reversal between means and ends changes, too. Rather than play counting as a means (for pay) as in the first case, jobs take on the role of serving a person's play interest. It is unusual for this instrumentality to appear so directly. It would seem that the majority of the Western workforce experiences their work as a means to receiving a salary, the source of the money that will be parsed out in support of their needs including, eventually, their play needs. Some of the people who find themselves employed in jobs that they do not enjoy continue in them because their income covers the costs of their leisure or "true vocation"—those things they genuinely want to spend their time doing, the fun and meaningful activities they pursue away from their "just-a-job"-work. This is why the aspiring actor who is also a waiter is a recognizable stereotype.

But Ong is presenting another scenario, something better—in fact, what he presents is the *best*. The mechanic, research engineer, financier, and philosopher whom he discusses are, after all, the greatest in their fields. It is as if their entire careers exist for the sake of supporting nothing more than their kens to tinker with machines, play around with industrial complex possibilities, and so on. They are happy in their work because their passions are at home there. What Ong provides as an insight—*This is what the apex looks like*—Joerg Rieger broaches as a matter of justice—*Is it right for this blessed confluence to hold only for a select few at the top?* In the conclusion of his book *No Rising Tide: Theology, Economics, and the Future*, Rieger addresses in passing whether we dare

---

can't tell you what to do, kid. ... Money's the cheapest thing. Liberty, freedom is the most expensive" (*Bill Cunningham New York*). It dawns on me that if any modern-day figure should count as a religious-ethical-aesthete, it is Bill Cunningham.

imagine entitlement for "work-play" as a swath of rights broad enough to encompass all workers.[203]

There are non-profit organizations and global, political institutions devoted to the protection of play and work as independent, distinct goods. For example, the NGO Right to Play seeks to establish play as a right for the world's children. In this, it combats unfair labor practices and dire living conditions that deprive the young of childhood amusement. In addition, the United Nations in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights lists entitlement to work as its twenty-third article. What, though, of the right to play at work? Does such a right exist and, if so, to what extent—that is, for whom does it hold? Is it the purview of the élite few? What is its ground, what does it entail, and what is necessary to sustain it? Here I am not thinking of the sinister gestures of multinational corporations that turn their offices into funhouses as a strategy for extricating more hours and productivity from their already very-worked workers.[204] Instead, I have in mind the ability, referenced above, to broach one's professional life as the fulfillment of one's personal play calling or inner play-drive. Could each person achieve this?

In the same way that there is no set formula for protecting play from the effects of professionalization, there is no obvious method for universally generating the experience of play in work. Yet Rieger is interested in the possibility of exactly such a move. He does not share Ong's top-down perspective. Rather than look at (or from) the peak, Rieger makes a point of proceeding from the underside, seeing as one below (*No Rising Tide*, 19). In advancing his picture not only of common rights but also of the common good, he writes:

> Do *all* people have the opportunity to develop and employ their creativity for the common good? The opportunity to employ one's creativity is usually seen as one

---

[203] Such a concept might seem fantastic enough to please Harvey Cox or ancient enough to pass as Plato's function principle in the *Republic* (353a, 443c, etc.).

[204] See "Down with Fun: The Depressing Vogue for Having Fun at Work." *The Economist*. Sep. 16, 2010.

of the privileges of those who occupy higher-level jobs in politics, industry, or intellectual production through the academy and other outlets. But the notion of the common good reminds us that this is not enough, and that *no one* should be deprived of the opportunity to labor creatively, so as not to stifle the creativity of work as a whole. (157, emphasis mine)

In this quotation, Rieger affirms Ong's observation about the fortunately creative, while also challenging its fairness. This accords with Rieger's call to respond at a structural level to the systemic failures of capitalism. A new economic arrangement would surely seem to be required to elevate everybody's potential to thrive playfully at work. Or would it?

Having tread out the path of Peters's description of "working without a work" and its implications for a while, how far afield are we now from improvisation? Peters's use of the notion *creative destruction* is nearby (many kinds of jobs would have to be eliminated in the process of making way for new labor of the transcendentally fulfilling, life-expanding sort that Rieger advocates). But it is the Lewis-Davidson position that all of life is improvisation, which rescues this theologically-minded discussion of Ong and Rieger from being misplaced or unnecessary. For, if we agree with Lewis and Davidson's identification of all people as routine improvisers, and if our understanding of Peters's account is correct that improvisation in its working-without-a-work nature shows the line between work and play to be razor thin, then Rieger's vision may be realized even before a revolution. It is as if, rather than waiting for an economic miracle to lift the tide, an ordinary worker could go some way toward buoying the play status of his employment himself by working improvisatorially—exercising and negotiating power ingenuously in applying overaccepting as a technique of freedom, for example.

III. CONCLUSION

This chapter has provided me with the opportunity to discuss grace in conjunction with freedom against the backdrop of improvisation in three ways. What

remains to be explained is the implication of the choice to place improvisation last: Why is this specific play form suited to occupy the final position in this study? This question carries particular weight given that I have chosen in this dissertation to trace a play dialectic along Kierkegaard's teleological trajectory of existence. By matching the subject of improvisation with Kierkegaard's notion of Religiousness *B* or Christianity, I have made an intuitive yet difficult value judgement. Improvisation deserves to be the goal toward which a life of play aims because of the model that improvisation provides, above all, of freedom within constraint. There will always be rules to a game; that structure is essential to play and to good play. Similarly, in the Christian walk, the Law never goes away. Grace is the power of this dual recognition. It grows when preparation and playfulness go together and remain intertwined.

Conclusion

In "Free to Play: An Analysis in Aesthetic, Ethical, and Religious Movements,"
we have progressed—not existentially, of course, but discursively—through each of the
spheres and substrata in Kierkegaard's philosophy as they find representation in the
works of *Either/Or* and *Fear and Trembling* in particular. To recapitulate, sensuous
immediacy, the first moment of the aesthetic, was met in chapter 1 with an analysis of
children's play, which was informed by the theories of Erik Erikson and other twentieth-
century psychologists. Issues of escapism and the free play of the imagination as they
relate to over-reflection, the second moment of the aesthetic, were engaged in chapter 2
through a consideration of a new form of fantasy play to arise with Internet technology:
Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games. In conjunction with the specific
MMORPG *World of Warcraft*, features of Schleiermacher's notion of *Phantasie* were
presented.

As children we are free when we play, having more openness and opportunity to
enjoy activities for their own sake than at perhaps any other period of life. This freedom
is conditioned by the playfulness of those surrounding us and is circumscribed by our
circumstances. The disposition of nearby adults and fellow children may hinder or help
us to experience play, even as the contingencies of our physical settings determine what
types of activities are possible for us. With the development of cognitive capacities and
sheer physical growth, children take on new play forms. For example, our play becomes
more social and more scheduled as we age. Playing in more formalized ways teaches us
to respect restrictions. Repression increases; it becomes less socially sanctioned (both
during our play and in the times outside of playing) to follow our whims, live in the
moment, and think of ourselves as occupying the center or the whole of our environs.
We acquire finer and finer distinctions between self and other. At the same time, it

becomes possible to enjoy more complicated games, including games based in language and symbolism. This of course opens up enormous ludic possibilities, including the creation of sophisticated fantasies.

In adolescence but also in adulthood, we have chances to play in an imaginative fashion, exercising our mind in powerful ways as we leave behind the restrictions of the framework of reality. Playing thus, we find the freedom of combining ideas that do not normally belong together. Under states of fantasy we are open not only to the new but also to the bizarre. It may not be appropriate to conduct ourselves in the shared (non-play, workaday) world according to our fantasies, but it is nevertheless psychologically beneficial to have some avenues for release and escape.

Computer technologies allow us now to engage in fantasy in specific ways. The Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game phenomenon grew out of offline role-playing games, chiefly *Dungeons & Dragons*. And so while play that is centered in the act of fantasy may exhibit certain general tendencies toward expansiveness (of mind) and constraint (of action), it takes on particular limitations and liberties under the guise of MMORPGs. One example of such a shift concerns the enforcement of rules. Conduct or play behavior is more regulated in electronic games in that rules that are etched in computer coding are harder to break than the non-programmed rules of analog games. This type of restriction is less concerning perhaps than the way that players may come to be "bound" to their fantasy lives. It is not only that the freedom experienced within fantasy may not translate to or propitiously inform one's way of everyday living. The allure of possibility of pretend worlds may prove addictive and therefore debilitating.

The entirety of the ethical stage, which highlights the willingness to cede some measure of "freedom" in order to actualize particular possibilities in the world and so to become more truly free, hinges on the notion of choice. Thus, in chapter 3 I examined how the call to maturity comes through decision-making by way of game theory in Pascal's "*Infini – Rien*" *pensée*. This wager plays off of notions of play as a free activity;

being *forced* to *gamble* on God's existence is paradoxical. Once one realizes that one has to make a choice, one can leverage the power of the mind to make a reasonable, weighted decision. The impersonal, universally valid rules of probability dictate how we should wager. Only then is the body engaged: one carries out the choice to follow God by physically enacting rituals. Worship practices cultivate positive traits like friendship, gratitude, and sincerity in the libertine convert, who in his conversion sacrifices the "liberties" of his former way of life. It is interesting that in the scenario that Pascal paints the libertine has only assented to Christian belief intellectually. He has further to go, it seems, to appropriate faith in the subjective way that Kierkegaard would laud.

The third sphere contains the move from pagan and pre-Christian forms of religiosity to a way of life grounded in the absolute paradox of Jesus Christ in whom (absurdly, incomprehensibly) the eternal and temporal meet. To that end, implications of the ludic status of humanity were engaged in chapter 4. The claim in Plato's *Laws* that human beings are the puppets, or even toy artifacts, of god has consequences for how we act. Being tethered to god by the golden cord of reason gives us reason to think well of ourselves *and* to think of ourselves as occupying a low position insofar as the cord is pulled from above. These elements moderate each other and lead us to live playfully even in the face of serious matters.

The transition from the propaedeutic to Christianity to Christianity itself is a movement from guilt-consciousness to sin-consciousness. In a manner reminiscent of the journey of *Geist* in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, the situation worsens before it improves. In short, one must go through feelings of guilt to recognize sin, and one must pass through awareness of one's sin in order to realize "eternal blessedness." One relinquishes the despair of sin through faith in the paradox of Christ. Faith, then, becomes the key to full-fledged freedom, a freedom that is not destroyed in the face of boundaries. Improvisation was matched in chapter 5 to Kierkegaard's celebration of Christianity as a way of life predicated on joy as well as terror, jest in addition to

earnestness. This form of play was taken to model a rigorous spontaneity that accords with the *power* of grace as the ability to respond to unexpected—and difficult—situations with the appearance of ease. For, improvisation requires all the skill of hard discipline even as it involves reliance on and responsiveness to others. Improvisation, like *agapê* love, never fails *in that failure never puts it to an end*.[205]

Having retraced these steps, let us think of how the path of this investigation may be extended.

The Continuance of Virtue Ethics

What might the broader significance be of this investigation into play as the dialectical conjoining of freedom and constraint? How might this dissertation not only fit into the literature on Kierkegaard and stretch the field of play studies but also further our understanding of virtue ethics? In what remains, I would like to reiterate the distinction between the activity of play and the attitude of playfulness, and gesture towards reasons why playfulness should be included in character-based accounts of the good life.

I have made a concerted effort in the preceding chapters to link the activity of play (whether that of free play or the play of games with rules) to freedom. In a variety of ways, I repeated the claim that play is predicated on freedom and that play, in turn, can serve as the grounding condition for freedom. A measure of freedom is required in order for play to occur, and in experiencing play people may experience a larger, fuller freedom. They may feel the pleasure of knowing that they can unhinge themselves from necessity: they are free because they are in the position to do something unnecessary, unproductive, and frivolous. Players might also find freedom in mastery, that is, in

---

[205] "It [love, *agapê*] bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends [falls down, fails, (*ek*)*piptei*]. …" (1 Corinthians 13:7-8a).

having an outlet to demonstrate (and refine) their skillfulness. The possibility to discover or act out of new or seldom-accessed parts of one's personality is another form of freedom that play may offer.

But freedom is not the sole basis for which play and playfulness—its sometimes animating force or accompanying disposition—merit attention in the contemporary discourse on ethics. What is special about play is how play reveals the link between liberty and limitation. The proposition that I would like to consider here and in future research is that *playfulness is the attitude by which a player negotiates the relationship between liberty and limitation.* By playfulness, a player manages the interplay of freedom and constraint, the unnecessary and the obligatory, the escape from certain types of restrictions into other forms of rules.[206]

It is worth thinking about what might constitute limitation in this domain. Constraints may take the form of rules that guide player behavior—as moral laws set restrictions on human actions, and as grammatical conventions regulate language use—or they may appear in less formally structured ways. Constrictions still belong to open-ended activities that do not have a clear "win, lose, or draw" result. In those non-game cases of play, factors of constraint may be the decisions of one's playmates, the atmosphere generated by an audience, or the review of a critic. A child engaged in pretense with other children must be responsive to the other children's wishes and actions. No matter how free he otherwise is during this time of free play, he must abide within the socially determined sphere of play in order for the play to go on and for it to go well. And—notably—he helps set the parameters of play for his playmates in turn. Were a child engaged in "free play" to fail to respect his playmates' boundaries (for

---

[206] In his chapter "Rhetorics of the Imaginary," Brian Sutton-Smith has a short section on play and the playful. There, he contrasts the terms in a different way than I do, taking play to be what contravenes our expectations of the everyday, and what is playful to be metaplay—the challenge of normal expectations of play itself. See *The Ambiguity of Play*, pp. 147-148. Other than this, the secondary literature is largely silent on the distinction between playing and being playful.

example, by acting out of the spirit of the play), or were they to violate his unstated rules (for example, by rejecting or ignoring his play offerings), the play would suffer. It might even dissolve. A similar case could be made for the limitations that audiences place on performers, and the ways that one's co-performers' choices determine what is possible for one's own play experience. The atmosphere of a performance space and the decisions of one's fellow players open up and close down avenues for expression. All of this is to say that even "free play" is not entirely free. It is simply that the rules are less obvious than the rules that structure games. Like occurrences of absolute possibility, instances of totally free play are impossible to identify. We know that free play has boundaries in part because we are capable of recognizing free play as separate from other phenomena like work and rest—and games.[207]

Improvisation is a particularly compelling, even beautiful, model of play that draws on the disposition of playfulness in negotiating boundaries. In different cases of improvisation—from the dance stage to the comedy club to the jazz performance—a specific attitude is on view. The mindset of a playful person is strong but not overserious. It is not that such a player is unconcerned for the quality of her performance. Through her playfulness, a player may be extremely focused. What is remarkable about playfulness, however, is that it is relentlessly playful. Playfulness and resilience go hand in hand. Being ruled by a spirit of playfulness, improvisation does not get bogged down in failure. The improviser knows how to manage disappointments and overcome mistakes. Reacting to "unknowns" is difficult; it requires skillfulness. But having skills is not enough. Prowess must be supplemented with a disposition, the peculiar and joyful willingness to proceed no matter what. When a spirit of playfulness animates one's play, consequences do not determine one's affect or one's willingness to

---

[207] Sutton-Smith gives voice to a similar sentiment in analyzing a (single) jester before a public crowd of non-jesters. "We 'frame' him as a 'comedian' and he can play with material that most of us do not play with in the same irreverent way, but he is nevertheless confined by the rules of public presentation. That is, he may be playful as a comedian, but to be a comedian is to be 'in play,' that is, to be in a known, rule-bound play context" (*The Ambiguity of Play*, 150).

continue playing. A playful player has moved beyond the boundaries of instrumentality. She is *not controlled by* the results that ensue. Rather, she is *in control*. At this stage, a player is free.

In making this suggestion, I am claiming that playfulness is not automatically present amidst all experiences of play. It is possible to play un-playfully, which is related to Kierkegaard's idea that one can be a Christian un-Christianly and to Aristotle's idea that one can perform an action without having the corresponding virtue. What would it look like to play unplayfully? It is wrong, I think, to say that a serious attitude makes play unplayful. Play partakes in seriousness and frivolity in much the same way that it involves work and rest. The non-dualistic nature of play—the inability to locate an antonym to play, either in what is serious or in other ideas such as reason and sense—makes the essence of playfulness difficult to stipulate. That is, play does not lend itself to dichotomous treatment the way that work and rest do; play does not present an apposite term in the immediate way that work suggests a binary with rest. This trait, this nuanced "thirdness" (recognizable in Schiller's treatment of the play impulse as cutting between the formal and the material) is what makes play a compelling concept and an intellectually fertile topic.

Above, I imply that the capacity of *play* to include seriousness has repercussions for how *playfulness* is to be comprehended. Let me gesture here to the necessity in developing the distinction between the activity of play and the attitude of playfulness of inquiring into the relationship between play and playfulness. A deeper account of the virtue of playfulness will need to shed light on which defines which. Does playfulness arise from play or play from playfulness, or does the influence hold to some degree in both directions? To anticipate our discussion of virtue ethics, the relation between ludic activities and attitudes matters because of the dedication within that moral framework to ethical training: It is valuable to know whether to turn to play or to other practices for

proper habituation in the spirit of gracefully managing constraints, if playfulness is indeed to be a virtue worth cultivating.

Another qualification is in order. I have been keen to draw a connection between playfulness, improvisation, and the free(ing) negotiation of boundaries. It is not that the trait of playfulness is entirely lacking from or completely implicit within the phases of play considered in the earlier chapters. Playfulness may belong to and be evinced in children, videogamers, gamblers seeking infinity, and people who broach life by regarding themselves as toys of cosmic significance. But it does seem to me that playfulness is developed to its greatest extent in the free play of improvisation.[208]

If, following my definition, we take playfulness to be the disposition that enables players to negotiate the tension between freedom and constraint, to enact that dialectic successfully, it still stands to be seen why playfulness should be considered a virtue. What makes a virtue (*aretê*, "excellence") a virtue? A further, more basic challenge is developing an account of the desirability of playfulness, so conceived. How might we stipulate the precise goodness of the excellence of being able to respond to limitations (constraints, boundaries, constrictions, rules, laws) freely, without the diminishment of freedom?

Stretching back to Aristotle, virtue ethics is an approach to moral philosophy that is centered on character rather than conduct. It is teleological in having an aim, and *eudaimonistic* in aiming at happiness. "The virtues are precisely those qualities the possession of which will enable an individual to achieve *eudaimonia* and the lack of which will frustrate his movement toward that *telos*" (MacIntyre, 148). The other streams predominant in moral philosophy—deontology and utilitarianism—ask whether a particular act is right or wrong. To determine whether to perform a given deed,

---

[208] I am happy to consider alternate examples. What are fields of play beside improvisation that evoke such playfulness? Would worship, for instance, count or, as James Carse may have us see in *Finite and Infinite Games*, gardening?

Immanuel Kant, the figure most commonly associated with deontology, considers whether it would accord with and stem from the moral law, happiness aside. He maintains that the deed of telling a lie, for example, can never be sanctioned because a rational person could never *will* it to be universal. It is not the consequence of lying that makes it wrong; rather, it is the inner-contradictory, essentially irrational nature of lying that disqualifies it from having any possible moral worth. "*That will is absolutely good* which cannot be evil, hence whose maxim, if made a universal law, can never conflict with itself" (*Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* 4:437, original emphasis). Kant emphatically declares the importance of the will in the opening lines of the *Groundwork*, where he states that nothing is so good as a good will (4:393). One has a duty not only to act rationally in a manner that stands up to the test of the categorical imperative; one's actions must also be motivated by a pure will, that is from total respect for the moral law. This is the difference between acting in accordance with the moral law and acting *from* the moral law. Even with the prominence afforded the will, Kantian deontology remains action-driven. This is evinced by the fact that the will is regarded as "nothing other than practical reason" (4:412).

By contrast, the philosopher John Stuart Mill offers a consequentialist approach to assigning moral worth under the theory of utilitarianism. From this alternate perspective, the salient factor is the outcome or consequence of an act. A moral agent *could* be motivated to do something out of awe for the moral law but what really counts is maximizing happiness and minimizing pain. When considering what to do, then, the utilitarian poses the question of whether the act would increase *total* happiness. Even still, moral agents' character matters because virtue is related to happiness. As Mill writes, "if it may possibly be doubted whether a noble character is always the happier for its nobleness, there can be no doubt that it makes other people happier, and that the world in general is immensely a gainer by it. Utilitarianism, therefore, could only gain its end by the general cultivation of nobleness of character, even if each individual were

only benefited by the nobleness of others …" (142). The foregoing has been an extremely simplified account of the deontological and utilitarian schools of thought, which are represented by modern scholars such as Christine Korsgaard and Peter Singer, respectively. However, I hope that it has sufficiently set the grounds for a discussion of playfulness in terms of virtue ethics.

It is hard but not impossible to imagine having obligations to play in discrete circumstances under deontological and utilitarian ethical systems. Within the rubric of virtue ethics, however, there seems to be truer capaciousness for the consideration of the moral worth of engaging in play and approaching game and non-game situations with a playful disposition.

Virtue ethics differs from duty- and consequence-grounded approaches to ethics in being concerned with the total character of a person over and above particular points of conduct. A virtue ethicist imagines how to live and responds to moral quandaries first by conceiving what kind of person to be and then by thinking of how actions emerge from virtues. As Roger Crisp and Michael Slote explain, "the real reason why I should not lie to you is not that it is against the moral law, nor that it is likely not to maximize well-being, but because it is *dishonest*. The notions of virtue, then, are more basic than the notions at the heart of utilitarian and Kantian theory" ("Introduction," *Virtue Ethics*, 3, original emphasis). The guiding question "What qualities or virtues belong to a good person?" translates, whether quickly or eventually, into the question "How are these virtues cultivated?" Once the desired areas of character have been identified or deliberately affirmed, the project of habituation commences—ethical training is a crucial task and a continual undertaking within this Aristotle-inspired framework. Traditionally, one turned to the cardinal virtues in response to the question of which traits to pursue. It was maintained that one should seek to cultivate justice, wisdom, courage, and moderation in oneself. Because the quest to be a person of good character

entails concern for disposition, a further type of question that a virtue ethicist faces is: What does it mean to do acts of justice justly in the right times and circumstances?[209]

Even though the unity of the virtues is presumed, it is necessary to have discernment to know when to exercise one virtue instead of another, to act courageously rather than moderately, for example. If—to put it basically (but also, surely, unfairly)—the weak point of deontology is knowing how to formulate one's maxim (i.e., the subjective principle for guiding action), and if the flaw of utilitarianism lies in the challenge of assigning utility values (identifying but also quantifying the results of an action), the trouble here with virtue ethics concerns the ranking of virtues. How do I know when one virtue is called for instead of another? And what do I need to know in order to make that judgement?

The set of virtues receiving close attention (justice, wisdom, courage, and moderation) remained static for a remarkably long period of time. When, through the work of Elizabeth Anscombe in the late 1950s, virtue ethics began to undergo a revival, it became possible to propose new virtues to the register of moral goods. Now, as the conversation continues in works like *How Should One Live? Essays on the Virtues* (edited by Roger Crisp, 1996) and *Virtue Ethics, Here and Now* (edited by Stephen M. Gardiner, 2005), the classical list is being expanded to include "contemporary" traits.

It is my contention that playfulness merits attention alongside the "loftier" ideals, whether ancient or recently proposed, such as justice and dignity. In thinking that playfulness belongs on these lists, I am not assuming the stance that playfulness is peculiar to the contemporary world. Rather, I maintain that playfulness is an evergreen virtue. (In addition to the recommendation of playful living analyzed in chapter 4, recall Aristotle's recognition of the quality of *eutrapelia*, or wittiness, in the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

---

[209] This is a version of Aristotle's formulation in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, "to do this to the right person, to the right extent, at the right time, with the right motive, and in the right way" (II.9, 1109a).

Taken literally, *eutrapelos* refers to a well-spinning man. Such a person strikes the right balance between being a bore and being a fool. The link between nimbleness and playfulness is suggestive.) When drawing the portrait of a good person or thinking of a life of well-being, playfulness should not be overlooked. I might convey this sentiment more strongly by stating that accounts of virtue that ignore playfulness are incomplete. They are lacking an essential ingredient to the good life as it might be conceived under generally positive, favorable conditions whether in antiquity or postmodernity.

What is more, such accounts fail to address challenges that people commonly face in contemporary culture, with our society's struggle with underemployment on the one hand, and rampant "professionalism" (work obligations that stretch far beyond forty-hour-a-week bounds, identifying too strongly with one's job, engaging in meaningless labor in order "to get ahead"), on the other. These problems for our collective way of life do not simply concern *practices* of work, rest, and play. They are tied up with failures of *attitude*, too. In addition to structural flaws on the societal level, one finds imbalance among the dispositions of diligence, peacefulness, and playfulness in individuals. How does a good person live in the light of these constraints?

I see two ways in which my project could help to fill in the lacunae in current conversations within virtue ethics. First, "Free to Play" can strengthen the consideration of *eudaimonia* by showing how playfulness is intrinsically and instrumentally valuable. The trait of playfulness is worth pursuing on its own, for its own sake. The intrinsic worth of playfulness does not preclude playfulness from carrying positive effects, however. As a way of handling binds, the inner capacity to play proves to be an asset for life. It enables one to respond powerfully and freely to any number of the constraints— and failures—that one inevitably encounters and embodies as a human being.

There is a second way in which my study may add a needed perspective to the field. It may do so by supplying details of play's relation to other desirable traits like humility, perseverance, creativity, and—the *sine qua non* of improvisation discussed in

chapter 5—*la disponibilité* (relaxed awareness or openness). The need for a theory of play that gives an account of play as an abstract concept, while also taking into consideration its intersection with morality, is plain: One only has to read the news, catch a glimpse of the way subway riders individually *en masse* kill time, or look to one's students (and hear about their pastimes) to realize that we have arrived at a moment in which our relation as a culture to play is changing.[210] Being able to respond in a deliberative way now, in the twenty-first century, to this radical transformation in entertainment, and the concurrent truths about how we experience work and rest, depends on thinking through the nature of play, the conditions for its possibility, and the benefits and dangers it entails. Do people have the inner, moral resources to respond to these realities, of having too much time outside of work and not enough? Are people able to evaluate the new games being lobbed up by the entertainment industry? It is not that playfulness is a magic bullet that will resolve moral dilemmas but playfulness is a powerful and empowering component of navigating the complexities of our current moral situation.

Even if we were not being submerged under this tidal wave of change in amusements, we would still have good cause to study play and playfulness. For, playfulness is a virtue that intertwines with other, traditionally esteemed traits like humility and perseverance, as well as the much praised and sought after good of creativity. A player exhibits humility in taking on roles that may be beneath her ordinary persona or in "being a good sport" when she accepts defeat. Play teaches perseverance under pleasant circumstances. In addition to the playfulness of a child

---

[210] This sweeping change is represented by Zynga, which the *New York Times* reports as having a market capitalization of \$2.69 billion (http://dealbook.on.nytimes.com/public/overview?symbol=ZNGA, accessed 03/25/2013)! Zynga is well known as the game company that spawned the oddly popular game FarmVille. According to its website, it has more than 240 million monthly active users playing its social games (http://company.zynga.com/about, accessed 03/25/2013). The ascension of new play forms is captured as well by the "game layer" enthusiast Seth Priebatsch. For an introduction to his ideas on the potential of game platforms, see "The Game Layer on Top of the World" at http://www.ted.com/talks/seth_priebatsch_the_game_layer_on_top_of_the_world.html (accessed 03/25/2013).

mastering a move, think of the inner state of a musician who works hard to play a complicated phrase well. The mixture of frustration and joy in playful repetition is not unrelated to the moral good of patient resolve. One may locate humility in the need to play again insofar as it is failure that calls for repetition—challenging play humbles— although it may be hard to ascertain whether it is sheer pleasure or technical difficulty that calls for someone to "play it again." So there are connections between play, humility, and perseverance. Mostly, though, what I find venerable about playfulness is its relation to *disponibilité*. If we seek to cultivate the discernment to undertake the right ludic activities at the right times, to attain the balance between looseness and tautness, relaxation and tension (or attention)—in short, to know how to play playfully—we will not only open ourselves to freeing constraints; we will make ourselves available to freedom. "Between us two, only freedom's own game will prevail" (Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, I, 361).

Bibliography

Aarseth, Espen J. *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1997.

Adorno, Theodor W. *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic*. Trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989.

Agamben, Giorgio. *Infancy and History: The Destruction of Experience*. Trans. Liz Heron. London: Verso, 2007.

Albright, Ann Cooper, and David Gere, eds. *Taken by Surprise: A Dance Improvisation Reader*. Middletown, C.T.: Wesleyan UP, 2003.

Annas, Julia. *Platonic Ethics, Old and New*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1999.

Anscombe, Elizabeth. "Modern Moral Philosophy." *Philosophy* 33 (Jan. 1958): 1-19.

Ardley, Gavin. "The Role of Play in the Philosophy of Plato." *Philosophy* 42 (July 1967): 226-244.

Ariès, Philippe. *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life*. Trans. Robert Baldick. New York: Vintage Books, 1965.

Aristotle. *The Nicomachean Ethics*. Trans. David Ross. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009.

Asfour, Nana. "A War Zone I Can't Escape." *New York Times Magazine* 01 Feb. 2013: Lives.

Attali, Jacques. *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*. Trans. Brian Massumi. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985.

Aumann, Antony. "On the Validity of Pascal's Wager." *The Heythrop Journal* (2011): 1-8.

Bach, Sheldon. "Narcissism, Continuity, and the Uncanny." *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis* 56 (1975): 77-86.

---. *Narcissistic States and the Therapeutic Process*. New York: Jason Aronson, 1985.

Bado-Fralick, Nikki, and Rebecca Sachs Norris. *Toying with God: The World of Religious Games and Dolls*. Waco, T.X.: Baylor UP, 2010.

Baerg, Andrew. "Governmentality, Neoliberalism, and the Digital Game." *Symplokē* 17.1-2 (2009): 115-127.

Bailenson, Jeremy, and Jim Blascovich. *Infinite Reality: Avatars, Eternal Life, New Worlds, and the Dawn of the Virtual Revolution*. New York: HarperCollins, 2011.

Bailey, Derek. *Improvisation: Its Nature and Practice in Music*. Cambridge, M.A.: Da Capo Press, 1993.

Barth, Karl. *Church Dogmatics*. Trans. H. Knight, G.W. Bromiley, et al. 2nd ed. Vol 3. London: Continuum, 2004.

---. *Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart*. Trans. Clarence K. Pott. Grand Rapids, M.I.: Williams B. Eerdmans, 1986.

Bartle, Richard A. "From MUDs to MMORPGs: The History of Virtual Worlds." Hunsiger, Klastrup, and Allen 22-39.

Bass, Alan. "Play's the Thing: Jugs are Us." *Qui Parle* 17.2 (2009): 149-169.

Bataille, Georges. *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*. Trans. Allan Stoekl. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985.

Bateson, Gregory. *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*. New York: University of Chicago Press, 1972.

Bauckham, Richard. *The Theology of Jürgen Moltmann*. London: Continuum, 1995.

Beaumont, Lesley. "Child's Play in Classical Athens." *History Today* 44.8 (1994): 30-35.

Begbie, Jeremy. *Theology, Music and Time*. Cambridge Studies in Christian Doctrine Ser. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge UP, 2000.

Bellah, Robert N. *Religion in Human Evolution: From the Paleolithic to the Axial Age*. Cambridge, M.A.: Harvard UP, 2011.

Benardete, Seth. *Plato's "Laws": The Discovery of Being*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000.

Benjamin, Walter. *Selected Writings*. Trans. Rodney Livingston. Vol. 2. Cambridge, M.A.: Harvard UP, 1999.

Berkowitz, Aaron L. *The Improvising Mind: Cognition and Creativity in the Musical Moment*. New York: Oxford UP, 2010.

Berliner, Paul F. *Thinking in Jazz: The Infinite Art of Improvisation*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994.

Berryman, Jerome W. *Children and the Theologians: Clearing the Way for Grace*. Harrisburg, P.A.: Morehouse Publishing, 2009.

---. *Godly Play: A Way of Religious Education*. New York: HarperCollins, 1991.

Bertung, Birgit. "Yes, A Woman *Can* Exist." *Feminist Interpretations of Søren Kierkegaard*. Ed. Céline Léon and Sylvia Walsh. University Park, P.A.: Pennsylvania State UP, 1997. 51-67.

Berzonsky, Michael D. "Eriksonian Developmental Stages." *Corsini Encyclopedia of Psychology*. Ed. Irving B. Weiner and W. Edward Craighead. John Wiley & Sons,

2009. 1-2.

Bial, Henry, ed. *The Performance Studies Reader*. London: Routledge, 2004.

Bill Cunningham New York. Dir. Richard Press. Zeitgeist, 2010. Film.

Blum, Stephen. "Recognizing Improvisation." *In the Course of Performance: Studies in the World of Musical Improvisation*. Ed. Bruno Nettle and Melinda Russell. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998. 27-45.

Bobonich, Christopher. "Persuasion, Compulsion and Freedom in Plato's Laws." *The Classical Quarterly* 41.2 (1991): 365-388.

---. "Plato on Utopia." *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy.* 01 Apr 2010. <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/plato-utopia>

---. *Utopia Recast: Plato's Later Political Philosophy*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002.

Bobonich, Christopher, ed. *Plato's "Laws": A Critical Guide*. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge UP, 2010.

Boitano, John F. *The Polemics of Libertine Conversion in Pascal's* Pensées*: A Dialectic of Rational and Occult Libertine Beliefs.* Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 2002.

Bolton, Andrew. "The Romantic Mind" and "Romantic Gothic and Cabinet of Curiosities." *Savage Beauty*. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2011. Web. 25 July 2011. <http://blog.metmuseum.org/alexandermcqueen/about>

Bordt, Michael. *Platons Theologie*. Freiburg: Verlag Karl Alber, 2006.

Boudreau, Kelly. "Online Role-Playing Games." *The Video Game Explosion: A History from Pong to Playstation ® and Beyond*. Ed. Mark J.P. Wolf. Westport, C.T.: Greenwood Press, 173-176.

Bowman, Sarah Lynne. *The Functions of Role-Playing Games: How Participants Create Community, Solve Problems and Explore Identity*. Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Company, 2010.

Brinkman, Alexander Russell. *Pascal Programming for Music Research*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990.

Britt, Aaron. "Avatar." *New York Times Magazine* 10 Aug. 2008.

Bromiley, Geoffrey William. *An Introduction to the Theology of Karl Barth*. Grand Rapids, M.I.: Eerdmans, 1979.

Brown, Paul. "Boredom, Power, and Self-Actualization in Azeroth." Cuddy 67-80.

Brown, Stuart L. *Play: How it Shapes the Brain, Opens the Imagination, and Invigorates the Soul*. New York: Avery, 2009.

Brown, Tim. "Tales of Creativity and Play." Serious Play Conference. May 2008.

Browne, David. *Amped: How Big Air, Big Dollars, and a New Generation Took Sports to the Extreme*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2004.

Burdette, Hillary L., and Robert C. Whitaker. "Resurrecting Free Play in Young Children: Looking Beyond Fitness and Fatness to Attention, Affiliation, and Affect." *Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine* 159 (2005): 46-50.

Burghardt, Gordon M. *The Genesis of Animal Play: Testing the Limits*. Cambridge, M.A.: MIT, 2006.

Bury, R.G. "The Theory of Education in Plato's *Laws*." *REG* 50 (1937): 304-320.

Caillois, Roger. *Man, Play and Games*. Trans. Meyer Barash. Chicago: University of Urbana Press, 2001.

Carey, Benedict. "In Cybertherapy, Avatars Assist with Healing." *New York Times* 23 Nov. 2010: D1.

Carroll, Lewis. *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There*. Ed. Hugh Haughton. New York: Penguin, 1998.

Carse, James P. *Finite and Infinite Games: A Vision of Life as Play and Possibility*. New York: Free Press, 1986.

Carvalho, John. "Improvisations, on Nietzsche, on Jazz." *Nietzsche, Philosophy and the Arts*. Ed. Salim Kemal, Ivan Gaskell, and Daniel W. Conway. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge UP, 1998. 187-211.

Castranova, Edward. *Exodus to the Virtual World: How Online Fun is Changing Reality*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.

Chatfield, Tom. *Fun Inc.: Why Gaming Will Dominate the Twenty-First Century*. New York: Pegasus Books, 2010.

Chudacoff, Howard P. *Children at Play: An American History*. New York: NYU Press, 2007.

Clarke, Desmond. "Blaise Pascal." *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. 25 Jan. 2011. <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2008/entries/pascal/>

Cleary, John J. "*Paideia* in Plato's *Laws*." Scolnicov 165-173.

Coleman, Francis X.J. *Neither Angel Nor Beast: The Life and Work of Blaise Pascal*. New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986.

Consalvo, Mia. *Cheating: Gaining Advantage in Videogames*. Cambridge, M.A.: MIT Press, 2007.

Cooper, John M. *Plato: Complete Works*. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997.

Corneliussen, Hilde, and Jill Walker Rettberg, eds. *Digital Culture, Play, and Identity: A Critical Anthology of World of Warcraft Research*. Cambridge, M.A.: MIT Press, 2008.

Cox, Harvey. *The Feast of Fools: A Theological Essay on Festivity and Fantasy*. New York: Harper & Row, 1969.

Craigo-Snell, Shannon. *Silence, Love, and Death: Saying Yes to God in the Theology of Karl Rahner*. Milwaukee, W.I.: Marquette UP, 2008.

Crawford, Matthew B. *Shop Class as Soulcraft: An Inquiry Into the Value of Work*. New York: Penguin, 2009.

Crisp, Roger, ed. *How Should One Live? Essays on the Virtues*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1996.

Crisp, Roger, and Michael Slote, eds. *Virtue Ethics*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1997.

Crossley, John P., Jr. "The Ethical Impulse in Schleiermacher's Early Ethics." *Journal of Religious Ethics* 17.2 (1989): 5-24.

Cuddy, Luke, and John Nordlinger, eds. *World of Warcraft and Philosophy*. Chicago: Open Court, 2009.

Danet, Brenda. *Cyberpl@y: Communicating Online.* New Technologies/New Cultures Ser. Oxford: Berg, 2001.

Daniels, Bruce C. *Puritans at Play: Leisure and Recreation in Colonial New England*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995.

Davidson, Arnold I. "Improvisation as Ethical Form." Columbia University. New York, N.Y. 13 Nov. 2008.

Davidson, Hugh M. *The Origins of Certainty: Means and Meanings in Pascal's* Pensées. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979.

Davis, Stephen T. "Pascal on Self-Caused Belief." *Religious Studies* 27.1 (Mar. 1991): 27-37.

De Pinotti, Garciela E. Marcos. "*Homme-mesure* versus *dieu-mesure: Traces de la polémique avec Protagoras dans les* Lois *IV*." Scolnicov 116-121.

Derrida, Jacques. *Dissemination*. Trans. Barbara Johnson. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981.

---. *The Ear of the Other: Otobiography, Transference, Translation*. Ed. Christie V. McDonald. New York: Schocken Books, 1985.

---. *Margins of Philosophy*. Trans. Alan Bass. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982.

---. *Writing and Difference*. Trans. Alan Bass. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978.

Devlin, Keith J. *The Unfinished Game: Pascal, Fermat, and the Seventeenth-Century Letter that Made the World Modern*. New York: Basic Books, 2008.

Dibbell, Julian. "The Life of the Chinese Gold Farmer." *New York Times Magazine* 17 June 2007.

Dostoevsky, Fyodor. *The Double* and *The Gambler*. Trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky. New York: Vintage Books, 2005.

"Down with Fun: The Depressing Vogue for Having Fun at Work." *The Economist* 16 Sep. 2010.

Driver, Tom F. *Liberating Rites: Understanding the Transformative Power of Ritual*. Boulder, C.O.: Westview Press, 1998.

Duflo, Colas. *Le Jeu: De Pascal à Schiller*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1997.

Edwards, A.W.F. "Pascal's Work on Probability." Hammond 40-52.

Elderkin, Kate. "Jointed Dolls in Antiquity." *American Journal of Archaeology* 34 (1930): 455-479.

Elkind, David. "Cognitive and Emotional Development Through Play." *Greater Good Magazine* 09 June 2008. Web. 14 Dec. 2011.

Ellison, Ralph. *Invisible Man*. New York: Random House, 1995.

Elster, Jon. "Pascal and Decision Theory." Hammond 53-74.

Elster, Jon, and Ole-Jørgen Skog, eds. *Getting Hooked: Rationality and Addiction*. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge UP, 1999.

Erikson, Erik H. *Childhood and Society*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1963.

---. *The Life Cycle Completed*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1998.

---. *Toys and Reason: Stages in the Ritualization of Experience*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1977.

Evans, C. Stephen. *Kierkegaard's Ethic of Love: Divine Commands and Moral Obligations*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2004.

---. *Kierkegaard's "Fragments" and "Postscript": The Religious Philosophy of Johannes Climacus*. Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1983.

Evans, James H. *Playing*. Christian Explorations of Daily Living Ser. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010.

Ferreira, M. Jamie. *Kierkegaard*. Blackwell Great Minds Ser. Malden, M.A.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009.

---. *Love's Grateful Striving: A Commentary on Kierkegaard's* Works of Love. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2001.

Ferreyrolles, Gérard. *Les Reines du monde: l'imagination et la coutume chez Pascal*. Paris: Champion, 1995.

Fine, Gary Alan. *Shared Fantasy: Role Playing Games as Social Worlds*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002.

Fitzgerald, Ross, ed. *The Eleven Saving Virtues*. Port Melbourne, Australia: Minerva, 1995.

Force, Pierre. "Pascal and Philosophical Method." Hammond 216-234.

---. *Le Problème herméneutique chez Pascal*. Paris: J. Vrin, 1989.

Frank, Lawrence K. "Therapeutic Play Techniques: Play in Personality Development." *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 25 (1955): 576-590.

Franklin, Seb. "'We Need Radical Gameplay, Not Just Radical Graphics': Towards a Contemporary Minor Practice in Computer Gaming." *Symplokē* 17.1-2 (2009): 163-180.

Frede, Dorothea. "Puppets on Strings: Moral Psychology in *Laws* Books 1 and 2." Bobonich 108-126.

Freud, Sigmund. *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Trans. James Strachey. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1961.

---. "On Narcissism." *The Freud Reader*. Ed. Peter Gay. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1989.

---. *Totem and Taboo: Some Points of Agreement between the Mental Lives of Savages and Neurotics*. Trans. James Strachey. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1950.

Freydberg, Bernard. *The Play of the Platonic Dialogues*. Literature and the Sciences of Man. Vol. 12. New York: Peter Lang, 1997.

Freysinger, Valeria. "Play in the Context of Life-Span Human Development." Fromberg and Bergen 53-62.

Fromberg, Doris Pronin, and Doris Bergen, eds. *Play from Birth to Twelve: Contexts, Perspectives, and Meanings*. 2nd ed. New York: Routledge, 2006.

Fuller, Mark. "The Improv Approach to Listening." Interview with Adam Bryant. *New York Times* Sunday Business, 17 Apr. 2011.

Gadamer, Hans-Georg. *Truth and Method*. Trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall. 2nd ed. London: Continuum, 2004.

Galloway, Alexander. *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006.

Garff, Joakim. *Søren Kierkegaard: A Biography*. Trans. Bruce H. Kirmmse. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2005.

Garner, Barbara P., and Doris Bergen. "Play Development from Birth to Age Four." Fromberg and Bergen 3-11.

Geertz, Clifford. *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books, 1973.

Gellman, Jerome. *Abraham! Abraham! Kierkegaard and the Hasidism on the Binding of Isaac*.

Burlington, V.T.: Ashgate, 2003.

Gigliotti, Carol. "Aesthetics of a Virtual World." *Leonardo* 28.4 (1995): 289-295.

Gitlin-Weiner, Karen. "Clinical Perspectives on Play." Fromberg and Bergen 353-367.

Goetz, Christopher. "Tether and Accretions: Fantasy as Form in Videogames." *Games and Culture* 7 (2012): 419-440.

Goldman, Danielle. "Imagination and Improvisation: The Holy Play of Congregational Worship." Union Theological Seminary. New York, N.Y. 29 Mar. 2011. Guest Presentation.

---. *I Want to Be Ready: Improvised Dance as a Practice of Freedom*. Ann Arbor, M.I.: University of Michigan Press, 2010.

Golumbia, David. "Games without Play." *New Literary History* 40.1 (2009): 179-204.

Gopnik, Alison. *The Philosophical Baby: What Children's Minds Tell us about Truth, Love, and the Meaning of Life*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2009.

Gouhier, Henri. *Blaise Pascal: Commentaires*. Paris: J. Vrin, 1966.

Grey, Sarah. "A Refusal to Play Along: Videogaming and Ludic Thought." Diss. U. of Minnesota, 2010.

Grimes, Ronald L. "Ritual and the Improvisational Arts." *Ron Grimes: Ritual Studies International*, 2010. Web. 25 July 2011. <http://ronaldlgrimes.twohornedbull.ca/current-research/ritual-improvisation>

Grimsley, Ronald. *Søren Kierkegaard and French Literature: Eight Comparative Studies*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1966.

Groos, Karl. *The Play of Animals*. Trans. Elizabeth L. Baldwin. New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1898.

---. *The Play of Man*. Trans. Elizabeth L. Baldwin. New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1919.

"Groove." *Jazz Glossary*. The Center for Jazz Studies at Columbia University, n.d. Web. 25 July 2011.

Guardini, Romano. *The Spirit of the Liturgy*. Trans. Ada Lane. London: Sheed & Ward, 1937.

Gundert, Hermann. "*Zum Spiel bei Platon*." Landgrebe 188-221.

Guthrie, W.K.C. *A History of Greek Philosophy: Plato the Man and His Dialogues: Earlier Period*. Vol. 4. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge UP, 1975.

Guyer, Paul. *Kant and the Experience of Freedom: Essays on Aesthetics and Morality*. New York: Cambridge UP, 1996.

Hacking, Ian. *The Emergence of Probability: A Philosophical Study of Early Ideas about Probability Induction and Statistical Inference*. 2nd ed. Cambridge U.K.: Cambridge UP, 2006.

---. *An Introduction to Probability and Inductive Logic*. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge UP, 2001.

---. "The Logic of Pascal's Wager." Jordan 21-30.

---. *The Taming of Chance*. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge UP, 1990.

Hadot, Pierre. *Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique*. Paris: Albin Michel, 2002.

Hammond, Nicholas, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Pascal*, Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge UP, 2003.

---. *Playing with Truth: Language and the Human Condition in Pascal's* Pensées. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994.

Handelman, Don. "Play." *Encyclopedia of Religion*. Ed. Lindsay Jones. 2nd ed. Detroit: Macmillan Reference U.S.A., 2005.

Hannay, Alastair, and Gordon D. Marino, eds. *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998.

Hans, James S. *The Play of the World*. Amherst, M.A.: University of Massachusetts Press, 1981.

Harper, Tauel. "The Smooth Spaces of Play: Deleuze and the Emancipative Potential of Games." *Symplokē*. 17.1-2 (2009): 129-142.

Harrigan, Pat, and Noah Wardrip-Fruin, eds. *Second Person: Role-Playing and Story in Games and Playable Media.* Cambridge, M.A.: MIT Press, 2007.

Harwood, Robin, Scott A. Miller, and Ross Vasta. *Child Psychology: Development in a Changing Society*. 5th ed. Hoboken, N.J.: John Wiley & Sons, 2008.

Hawley, John Stratton. *At Play with Krishna: Pilgrimage Dramas from Brindavan*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 1992.

---. "Every Play a Play Within a Play." Sax 115-130.

Hedley, Douglas. *Living Forms of the Imagination*. London: Continuum, 2008.

Hegel, G.W.F. *Early Theological Writings*. Trans. T.M. Knox. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1975.

Heidegger, Martin. *Holzwege*. Frankfurt: Vittorio Klostermann, 1957.

---. *Poetry, Language, Thought*. Trans. Albert Hofstadter. New York: Perennial Classics, 2001.

Heim, Michael. *The Metaphysics of Virtual Reality*. New York: Oxford UP, 1993.

Hein, Hilde. "Play as an Aesthetic Concept." *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 27.1 (1968): 67-71.

Hendaoui, Adel, Moez Limayem, and Craig W. Thompson. "3D Social Virtual Worlds: Research Issues and Challenges." *IEEE Internet Computing* 12.1 (2008): 88-92.

Henig, Robin Marantz. "Taking Play Seriously." *New York Times Sunday Magazine* 17 Feb. 2008.

Henricks, Thomas S. *Play Reconsidered: Sociological Perspectives on Human Expression*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006.

Herald, Diana Tixier. *Fluent in Fantasy: The Next Generation*. Westport, C.T.: Libraries Unlimited, 2008.

Hill, Simon. "MMO Subscriber Populations." *Altered Gamer*. 19 May 2011. Web. 18 Feb. 2013. <http://www.alteredgamer.com/pc-gaming/35992-mmo-subscriber-populations/>

Hillerbrand, Hans J. *The Protestant Reformation*. New York: HarperCollins, 2009.

Hobbes, Thomas. *Leviathan*. Ed. J.C.A. Gaskin. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1996.

Holloway, Richard, ed. *The Divine Risk*. London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1990.

Hughes, Bob. *Evolutionary Playwork: Reflective Analytic Practice*. 2nd ed. New York: Routledge, 2012.

Huizinga, Johan. *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1950.

Hunnicutt, Benjamin. "Leisure and Play in Plato's Teaching and Philosophy of Learning." *Leisure Studies* 12.2 (1990): 211-227.

Hunsiger, Jeremy, Lisbeth Klastrup, and Matthew Allen, eds. *The International Handbook of Internet Research*. New York: Springer, 2010.

Hursthouse, Rosalind. *On Virtue Ethics*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1999.

Hutchinson, Peter. *Games Authors Play*. London: Methuen, 1983.

Hyland, Drew A. *The Question of Play*. Lanham, M.D.: University Press of America, 1984.

Indie Game: The Movie. Dir. Lisanne Pajot. BlinkWorks, 2012. Film.

Iyer, Vijay. "Imagination and Improvisation: The Holy Play of Congregational Worship." Union Theological Seminary. New York, N.Y. 22 Mar. 2011. Guest Presentation.

Jaeger, Werner. *Paideia: The Ideals of Greek Culture: Volume III: The Conflict of Cultural Ideals in the Age of Plato*. Trans. Gilbert Highet. New York: Oxford UP,

1963.

James, William. *Pragmatism and Other Writings*. New York: Penguin Books, 2000.

Jenkins, David. "God and Risk (1)." Holloway 1-10.

Johnson, Phylis. *Second Life, Media, and the Other Society*. New York: Peter Lang, 2010.

Johnston, Robert K. *The Christian at Play*. Grand Rapids, M.I.: Eerdmans, 1983.

Johnstone, Keith. *Impro for Storytellers: Theatresports and the Art of Making Things Happen*. London: Faber and Faber, 1999.

Jones, Matthew L. *The Good Life in the Scientific Revolution: Descartes, Pascal, Leibniz and the Cultivation of Virtue*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006.

---. "Writing and *Sentiment*: Blaise Pascal, the Vacuum, and the *Pensées*." *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science* 32.1 (2001): 139-181.

Jonkers, Peter. "Illusory Imagination versus Nihilistic Reason: A Historical-Philosophical Case Study of the Role of Imagination in Religion." *Ars Disputandi* 2 (2002): 37-56.

Jordan, Jeff, ed. *Gambling on God: Essays on Pascal's Wager*. Lanham, M.D.: Rowman & Littlefield, 1994.

Jordan, Jeff. "The Many-Gods Objection." Jordan 101-114.

---. *Pascal's Wager: Pragmatic Arguments and Belief in God*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2006.

Jouët-Pastré, Emmanuelle. *Le jeu et le sérieux dans les* Lois de Platon. International Plato Studies Ser. Sankt Augustin: Academia Verlag, 2006.

Juul, Jesper. *The Art of Failure: An Essay on the Pain of Playing Video Games*. Cambridge, M.A.: MIT Press, 2013.

---. *A Casual Revolution: Reinventing Video Games and Their Players*. Cambridge, M.A.: MIT Press, 2010.

---. *Half-Real: Video Games between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds*. Cambridge, M.A.: MIT Press, 2005.

Kant, Immanuel. *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*. Trans. Robert B. Louden. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge UP, 2006.

---. *Critique of Judgment.* Trans. Werner S. Pluhar. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1987.

---. *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*. Trans. Mary Gregor. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge UP, 2010.

Kearns, Edward John. *Ideas in Seventeenth-Century France: The Most Important Thinkers and the Climate of Ideas in which They Worked*. Manchester, U.K.: Manchester UP, 1982.

Keen, Maurice. "The Birth of Childhood." *New York Review of Books*. 13 June 1991. Web. 04 July 2012.

Keen, Sam. *To a Dancing God*. New York: Harper & Row, 1970.

Kierkegaard, Søren. *The Book on Adler*. Trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1998.

---. *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. Trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1992.

---. *Either/Or*. Trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1987.

---. *Fear and Trembling*. Trans. Alastair Hannay. London: Penguin Books, 1985.

---. *Fear and Trembling*. Trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1983.

---. *Philosophical Fragments*. Trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1985.

---. *Practice in Christianity*. Trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1991.

---. *Stages on Life's Way: Studies by Various Persons*. Trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1988.

---. *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1993.

---. *Works of Love*. Trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1995.

King, Jason. "Which Way is Down? Improvisation on Black Mobility." *Women and Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 14:1 (2004): 25-45.

Klein, Melanie. "The Importance of Symbol-Formation in the Development of the Ego." *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 11 (1930): 24-39.

---. "The Psychoanalytic Play Technique." *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 25 (1955): 223-237.

Klinger, Eric. "Development of Imaginative Behavior: Implications of Play for a Theory of Fantasy." *Psychological Bulletin* 72.4 (1969): 277-298.

Konner, Melvin. *The Evolution of Childhood: Relationships, Emotion, Mind*. Cambridge, M.A.: Harvard UP, 2010.

Kosch, Michelle. *Freedom and Reason in Kant, Schelling, and Kierkegaard*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2006.

Koyré, Alexandre. *Du monde clos à l'univers infini*. Paris: Gallimard, 1988.

Krailsheimer, A.J. Introduction. *Pensées*. By Blaise Pascal. London: Penguin, 1995. ix-xxx.

Krentz, Arthur. "Play and Education in Plato's *Republic*." 18 Mar 2010.
     <http://www.bu.edu/wcp/Papers/Educ/EducKren/htm>

Kristeva, Julia. *Melanie Klein*. Trans. Ross Guberman. New York: Columbia UP, 2001.

Küchler, Tilman. *Postmodern Gaming: Heidegger, Duchamp, Derrida*. Studies in Literary
     Criticism and Theory Ser. New York: Peter Lang, 1994.

Laetz, Brian, and Joshua J. Johnston. "What is Fantasy?" *Philosophy and Literature* 32.1
     (2008): 161-172.

Laks, André. "Freedom, Liberality, and Liberty in Plato's *Laws*." *Social Philosophy and
     Policy* 24 (2007): 130-152.

Landgrebe, Ludwig, ed. *Beispiele: Festschrift für Eugen Fink zum 60. Geburtstag*. The
     Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1965.

Landreth, Garry, Linda Homeyer, and Mary Morrison. "Play as the Language of
     Children's Feelings." Fromberg and Bergen 47-52.

Lears, T.J. Jackson. *Something for Nothing: Luck in America*. New York: Viking Penguin,
     2003.

Lefka, Aikaterini. "*Souveraineté divine et liberté humaine dans les* Lois." Scolnicov 155-
     164.

Lesieur, Henry R. *The Chase: Career of the Compulsive Gambler*. Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor
     Press, 1977.

Lewis, George E. "Improvisation as a Way of Life: Reflections on Human Interaction."
     Columbia University. New York, N.Y. 07 Mar. 2011. University Lecture.

---. "Interactivity and Improvisation." *The Oxford Handbook of Computer Music*. Ed. Roger
     T. Dean. New York: Oxford UP, 2009. 457-466.

Liddell, Henry George, and Robert Scott. *An Intermediate Greek-English Lexicon Founded
     upon the Seventh Edition of Liddell and Scott's* Greek-English Lexicon. Oxford:
     Oxford UP, 1997.

Lindquist, Galina. "Elusive Play and its Relations to Power." *Focaal – European Journal of
     Anthropology* 37 (2001): 13-23.

Lippitt, John. *Humor and Irony in Kierkegaard's Thought*. New York: St. Martin's Press,
     2000.

Locke, John L. "Phases in the Child's Development of Language." *American Scientist* 82.5
     (1994): 436-445.

Louis Segond. Alliance Biblique Universelle. 1910.

Love, Andrew Cyprian. *Musical Improvisation, Heidegger, and the Liturgy: A Journey to*

the Heart of Hope. Studies in Art and Religious Interpretation Ser. Lewiston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellen, 2003.

Lugones, María. "Playfulness, 'World'-Travelling, and Loving Perception." *Hypatia* 2.2 (1987): 3-19.

Luther, Martin. *Martin Luther: Selections from his Writings*. Ed. John Dillenberger. New York: Anchor, 1962.

Lutz, Mark J. *Divine Law and Political Philosophy in Plato's* Laws. DeKalb, I.L.: Northern Illinois UP, 2012.

MacIntyre, Alasdair. *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*. 2nd ed. Notre Dame, I.N.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984.

Mackay, Daniel. *The Fantasy Role-Playing Game: A New Performing Art*. London: McFarland & Company, 2001.

MacKenzie, Charles Sherrard. *Blaise Pascal: Apologist to Skeptics*. Lanham, M.D.: University Press of America, 2008.

Malaby, Thomas M. "Anthropology and Play: The Contours of Playful Experience." *New Literary History*. 40.1 (2009): 205-218.

Marchant, James, Robert Vernam, and Joseph Fletcher Charles. *Cassell's Latin Dictionary: Latin-English and English-Latin*. New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1953.

Mariña, Jacqueline. "Schleiermacher, Realism, and Epistemic Modesty: A Reply to My Critics." *Schleiermacher, the Study of Religion, and the Future of Theology: A Transatlantic Dialogue*. Ed. Brent Sockness and Wilhelm Gräb. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2010. 121-134.

Massumi, Brian. *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*. Post-Contemporary Interventions Ser. Durham, N.C.: Duke UP, 2002.

Mathewes, Charles. "The Evolution of Religion." Rev. of *Religion in Human Evolution: From the Paleolithic to the Axial Age* by Robert N. Bellah. *The American Interest* VII.6 (July/Aug 2012): 70-75.

Matusik, Martin, Joseph Beck, and Merold E. Westphal, eds. *Kierkegaard in Post/Modernity*. Studies in Continental Thought Ser. Bloomington, I.N.: Indiana UP, 1995.

McDermott, Rachel Fell. "Playing with Durga in Bengal." Raj 143-159.

McDonald, William. "Søren Kierkegaard." *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. 20 Mar. 2013. <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2012/entries/kierkegaard/>

McGonigal, Jane. *Reality is Broken: Why Games Make Us Better and How They Can Change the World*. New York: Penguin Books, 2011.

McKenzie, Dylan. "Fantasies of Labor: Work and Play in *World of Warcraft*." M.A. Thesis. New York University, 2010.

Meadows, Mark Stephen. *I, Avatar: The Culture and Consequences of Having a Second life*. Berkeley: New Riders, 2008.

Meredith, Alex, Zaheer Hussain, and Mark D. Griffiths. "Online Gaming: A Scoping Study of Massively Multi-Player Online Role Playing Games." *Electronic Commerce Research* 9 (2009): 3-26.

Mesnard, Jean. *Pascal: His Life and Works*. Trans. G.S. Fraser. London: Harvill Press, 1952.

Meyer, Susan Sauvé. "Pleasure, Pain, and 'Anticipation' in Plato's *Laws*, Book I." Patterson and Karasmanis 349-366.

Michels, Scott. "Virtual Relationship Leads to Criminal Charges." *ABC News*. 26 Aug. 2008. Web. 25 Feb. 2013.

Mill, John Stuart. *On Liberty and Other Essays*. Ed. John Gray. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008.

Miller, David LeRoy. *Gods and Games: Toward a Theology of Play*. Cleveland, O.H.: The World Publishing Company, 1970.

Milner, G.B. "Homo Ridens: Towards a Semiotic Theory of Humour and Laughter" *Semiotica*, No. 5 (1972): 1-30.

Moltmann, Jürgen. *Theology and Joy*. London: SCM Press Ltd, 1973.

---. *Theology of Play*. Trans. Reinhard Ulrich. New York: Harper & Row, 1972.

Morgenbesser, Sidney, and Edna Ullman-Margalit. "Picking and Choosing." *Social Research* 44.4 (1977): 757-785.

Moriarty, Michael. "Grace and Religious Belief in Pascal." Hammond 144-161.

Morris, Thomas V. "Wagering and the Evidence." Jordan 47-60.

Morrow, Glenn. *Plato's Cretan City: A Historical Interpretation of the* Laws. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1993.

Moss, Jessica. *Aristotle on the Apparent Good: Perception,* Phantasia, *Thought, and Desire*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2012.

Murray, Simon David. *Jacques Lecoq*. Routledge Performance Practitioners Ser. London: Routledge, 2003.

Museum of Modern Art. "Exhibitions: Applied Design." Web. 27 Mar. 2013. <http://www.moma.org/visit/calendar/exhibitions/1353>

Nagel, Mechthild. *Masking the Abject: A Genealogy of Play*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2002.

Nancy, Jean-Luc. *The Experience of Freedom*. Trans. Bridget McDonald. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1993.

---. *L'expérience de la liberté*. Paris: Galilée, 1988.

---. *Listening*. Trans. Charlotte Mandell. New York: Fordham UP, 2007.

Neale, Robert E. *In Praise of Play: Toward a Psychology of Religion*. New York: Harper & Row, 1969.

Nelson, Victoria. *The Secret Life of Puppets*. Cambridge, M.A.: Harvard UP, 2001.

New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Revised Standard Version. Ed. Michael D. Coogan. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2001.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Birth of Tragedy* and *The Case of Wagner*. Trans. Walter Kaufmann. New York: Vintage Books, 1967.

Nightingale, Andrea. "Writing/Reading a Sacred Text: A Literary Interpretation of Plato's *Laws*." *Classical Philology* 88 (1993): 269-300.

North, Helen. *Sophrosyne: Self-Knowledge and Self-Restraint in Greek Literature*. Ed. Harry Caplan, James Hutton, and G.M. Kirkwood. Cornell Studies in Classical Philology 35. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1966.

O'Dwyer, Danny. "Escape from Mount Stupid: *World of Warcraft*." *GameSpot*. 16 April 2012. Web. 06 Feb. 2013.

Ogata, Amy F. "Creative Playthings: Educational Toys and Postwar American Culture." *Winterthur Portfolio* 39.2 (2004): 129-156.

Ong, Walter. Preface. *Man at Play*. By Hugo Rahner. New York: Herder and Herder, 1972. ix-xiv.

Ophir, Adi. *Plato's Invisible Cities: Discourse and Power in the* Republic. London: Routledge, 1991.

Oppenheim, Lois. *Imagination from Fantasy to Delusion*. New York: Routledge, 2013.

Orenstein, Peggy. "Should the World of Toys be Gender-Free?" *New York Times*. 29 Dec. 2011: A23.

Oxford English Dictionary Online. Oxford UP, Nov. 2010.

Ozment, Steven. *Ancestors: The Loving Family in Old Europe*. Cambridge, M.A.: Harvard UP, 2001.

Pangle, Thomas L. *The Laws of Plato*. New York: Basic Books, 1980.

---. "The Political Psychology of Religion in Plato's Laws." *The American Political Science Review* 70.4 (1976): 1059-1077.

Partenie, Catalin. "Plato's Myths." *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. 11 Feb. 2011. <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2009/entries/plato-myths/>

Pascal, Blaise. *Pensées*. Trans. Roger Ariew. Indianapolis: Hackett, 2004.

---. *Pensées*. Trans. A.J. Krailsheimer. London: Penguin, 1995.

---. *Les Provinciales Pensées*. Ed. Gérard Ferreyrolles and Philippe Sellier. Paris: *Le Livre de Poche*, 1999.

Pasqua, Hervé. *Blaise Pascal: Penseur de la grâce*. *Croire et Savoir* Ser. Paris: Éditions Téqui, 2000.

Patterson, Richard, Vassilis Karasmanis, and Arnold Hermann, eds. *Presocratics and Plato: A Festschrift in Honour of Charles Kahn*. Las Vegas: Parmenides, 2012.

Pattison, George. "Art in an Age of Reflection." Hannay and Marino 76-100.

Pellegrini, Anthony D., Daniel Dupius, and Peter K. Smith. "Play in Evolution and Development." *Developmental Review* 27 (2007): 261-276.

Penny, Simon. "Representation, Enaction, and the Ethics of Simulation." *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game*. Eds. Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Pat Harrigan. Cambridge, M.A.: MIT Press, 2004. 73-84.

Perkins, Robert L., ed. *International Kierkegaard Commentary*: Practice in Christianity. Vol. 20. Macon, G.A.: Mercer UP, 2004.

Peters, Gary. *The Philosophy of Improvisation*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009.

Phillips, Henry. "Pascal's Reading and the Inheritance of Montaigne and Descartes." Hammond 20-39.

Piaget, Jean. *Play, Dreams and Imitation in Childhood*. Trans. C. Gattegno and F. M. Hodgson. New York: Norton, 1962.

---. "Response to Brian Sutton-Smith." *Psychological Review* 73.1 (1966): 111-112.

Pieper, Josef. *Leisure: The Basis of Culture*. Trans. Alexander Dru. New York: Pantheon Books, 1963.

Plass, Paul. "'Play' and Philosophic Detachment in Plato." *TAPA* 98 (1967): 343-364.

Plato. *Complete Works*. Ed. John M. Cooper. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997.

---. *The Laws*. Trans. Trevor J. Saunders. London: Penguin, 2004.

---. *Plato with an English Translation*. Trans. R.G. Bury. Vols. 9-10. New York: Putnam, 1926.

---. *Republic*. Trans. G.M.A. Grube. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1992.

Poisso, Lisa. "Breakfast Topic: What Do You Not Have Time to Get into in Game?" *Joystiq*. 02 Feb. 2013. Web. 06 Feb. 2013. <http://wow.joystiq.com/2013/02/02/breakfast-topic-what-do-you-not-have-time-to-get-into-in-game/>

Possen, David D. "The Voice of Rigor." Perkins 161-185.

Proudfoot, Wayne. "Intuition and Fantasy in 'On Religion.'" *Interpreting Religion: The Significance of Friedrich Schleiermacher's* Reden über die Religion *for Religious Studies and Theology*. Ed. Dietrich Korsch and Amber L. Griffioen. Tübingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 2011. 87-98.

Pulaski, Mary Ann Spencer. *Understanding Piaget: An Introduction to Children's Cognitive Development*. New York: Harper & Row, 1971.

Rahner, Hugo. *Man at Play*. Trans. Brian Battershaw and Edward Quinn. New York: Herder and Herder, 1972.

Raj, Selva J., ed. *Sacred Play: Ritual Levity and Humor in South Asian Religions*. Albany: SUNY Press, 2010.

Randel, Don Michael, ed. *The Harvard Dictionary of Music*. 4th ed. Cambridge, M.A.: Harvard UP, 2003.

Rankin, H.D. "Plato and Man the Puppet." *Eranos* 60 (1962): 127-131.

---. "Toys and Education in Plato's *Laws*." *Hermathena* 92 (1958): 62-65.

Recco, Gregory, and Eric Sanday, eds. *Plato's* Laws*: Force and Truth in Politics*. Bloomington, I.N.: Indiana UP, 2013.

Rees, D.A. "Bipartition of the Soul in the Early Academy." *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 77 (1957): 112-118.

Rennie, Nicholas. "Between Pascal and Mallarmé: Faust's Speculative Moment." *Comparative Literature* 52.4 (Autumn 2000): 269-290.

Rieger, Joerg. *No Rising Tide: Theology, Economics, and the Future*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009.

Right to Play, n.p., 2010. Web. 25 July 2011. <http://www.righttoplay.com/International/Pages/Home.aspx>

Robbins, Sarah, and Mark Bell. *Second Life for Dummies*. Hoboken, N.J.: Wiley, 2008.

Roberts, Robert C. "Smiling with God: Reflections on Christianity and the Psychology of Humor." *Faith and Philosophy* 4.2 (Apr. 1987): 168-175.

Roochnik, David. "The 'Serious Play' of Book 7 of Plato's *Laws*." Recco and Sanday 144-153.

---. "The Serious Play of Plato's *Euthydemus*." *Interpretation* 18 (1991): 211-232.

Rowe, Christopher, and Malcolm Schofield, eds. *The Cambridge History of Greek and Roman Political Thought*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000.

Rubin, Kenneth H., Greta G. Fein, and Brian Vandenberg. "Play." *Socialization, Personality, and Social Development*. Ed. E. Mavis Hetherington. New York: John

Wiley & Sons, 1983. 694-774.

Russell, Olga Wester. *Humor in Pascal: An Examination of the Comic Humor of the French Philosopher Pascal*. North Quincy, MA: Christopher Publishing House, 1977.

Russon, John. "Education in Plato's *Laws*." Recco and Sanday 60-74.

Ryan, Marie-Laure. "From Playfields to Fictional Worlds: A Second Life for Ariosto." *New Literary History* 40.1 (2009): 159-176.

Rymaszewski, Michael. *Second Life: The Official Guide*. 2nd ed. Indianapolis: John Wiley, 2008.

Salen, Katie, and Eric Zimmerman. *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals*. Cambridge, M.A.: MIT Press, 2004.

Sallis, John. *Being and Logos: The Way of Platonic Dialogue*. Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1975.

Sargeaunt, G.M. "Song and Dance as a Function of the State." *The Hibbert Journal* 21 (1922-1923): 493-502.

---. "Man as God's Play Fellow." *The Hibbert Journal* 21 (1922-1923): 669-679.

Sattler, Barber. "Michael Bordt, *Platons Theologie*." *Bryn Mawr Classical Review* (July 2007).

Saunders, Trevor J. "The Structure of the Soul and the State in Plato's Laws." *Eranos* 60 (1962): 37-55.

Sax, William S., ed. *The Gods at Play: Līlā in South Asia.* New York: Oxford UP, 1995.

Schiller, Friedrich. *On the Aesthetic Education of Man: In a Series of Letters.* Trans. Elizabeth M. Wilkinson and L.A. Wiloughby. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982.

Schleiermacher, Friedrich. *On Freedom*. Trans. Albert L. Blackwell. Lewiston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellen, 1992.

---. *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers*. Trans. Richard Crouter. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge UP, 2000.

---. *Schleiermacher's* Soliloquies. Trans. Horace Leland Friess. Westport, C.T.: Hyperion, 1926.

Schofield, Malcolm. "Religion and philosophy in the *Laws*." Scolnicov 1-13.

Schrag, Calvin O. "The Kierkegaard-Effect in the Shaping of the Contours of Modernity." Matusik and Westphal 1-17.

Scolnicov, Samuel, and Luc Brisson, eds. *Plato's* Laws*: From Theory into Practice*. International Plato Studies. Vol. 15. Sankt Augustin: Academia Verlag, 2003.

Second Life. Linden Research, Inc. Web. 20 Feb. 2013. <www.secondlife.com>

Sellier, Philippe. *Pascal et Saint Augustin*. Paris: Albin Michel, 1995.

Senechal, Diana. *Republic of Noise: The Loss of Solitude in Schools and Culture*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield Education, 2012.

Shahar, Shulamith. *Childhood in the Middle Ages*. London: Routledge, 1990.

Shivel, Gail. "World of Warcraft: The Murloc is the Message." *Symplokē* 17.1-2 (2009): 205-213.

Shorter, Edward. *Making of the Modern Family*. New York: Basic Books, 1975.

Silcox, Mark, and Jon Cogburn. "Azeroth versus the Experience Machine." Cuddy 55-65.

Slingerland, Edward. *Effortless Action: Wu-wei As Conceptual Metaphor and Spiritual Ideal in Early China*. New York: Oxford UP, 2003.

Smith, Hazel, and Roger Dean. *Improvisation, Hypermedia and the Arts Since 1945*. Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1997.

Smith, Janet E. "Plato's Use of Myth in the Education of Philosophic Man." *Phoenix* 40.1 (1986): 20-34.

Smith, Peter K. *Children and Play*. Malden, M.A.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009.

Sockness, Brent W. "Schleiermacher and the Ethics of Authenticity: The 'Monologen' of 1800." *Journal of Religious Ethics* 32.3 (2004): 477-517.

Sommer, Doris. "Schiller and Company, or How Habermas Incites Us to Play." *New Literary History* 40.1 (2009): 85-103.

Spariosu, Mihai. *Dionysus Reborn: Play and the Aesthetic Dimension in Modern Philosophical and Scientific Discourse*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1989.

---. *God's Many Names: Play, Poetry, and Power in Hellenic Thought from Homer to Aristotle*. Durham, N.C.: Duke UP, 1991.

Spiller, Neil, ed. *Cyber Reader: Critical Writings for the Digital Era*. London: Phaidon, 2002.

Spivak, Gyatri. "Translator's Preface." *Of Grammatology*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1997. ix-lxxxvii.

Sponheim, Paul R. "Relational Transcendence in Divine Agency." Perkins 47-68.

Stallabrass, Julian. "Just Gaming: Allegory and Economy in Computer Games." *New Left Review* 198 (1993): 83-106.

Stalley, R. F. *An Introduction to Plato's Laws*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983.

Stark Smith, Nancy. "Dealing with the Heat." *Contact Quarterly* 9.3 (1984): 3.

Stendhal. *The Red and the Black*. London: Penguin, 2002.

Stevens, Quentin. *Ludic City: Exploring the Potential of Public Spaces*. New York: Routledge, 2007.

Stocks, J.L. "Schole." *The Classical Quarterly* 3.3 (1936): 177-187.

Strauss, Leo. *The Argument and Action of Plato's* Laws. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975.

Strawson, Galen. "Mental Ballistics or the Involuntariness of Spontaneity." *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 103 (2003): 227-256.

Suits, Bernard. *The Grasshopper: Games, Life and Utopia*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1978.

Sutton-Smith, Brian. *The Ambiguity of Play*. Cambridge, M.A.: Harvard UP, 1997.

---. "Piaget on Play: A Critique." *Psychological Review* 73.1 (1966): 104-110.

Swanton, Christine. *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2003.

Takahashi, Dean. "Second Life's Users Have Spent More Than a Billion Hours in the Virtual World." *Venture Beat.* 22 Sept. 2009. Web. 09 Feb. 2013. <http://venturebeat.com/2009/09/22/second-lifes-users-have-spent-more-than-a-billion-hours-in-the-virtual-world/>

Tanner, Kathryn. "Grace and Gambling." *Gambling: Mapping the American Moral Landscape*. Eds. Alan Wolfe and Erik C. Owens. Waco, T.X.: Baylor UP, 2009. 227-256.

Tavinor, Grant. *Art of Videogames*. Hoboken, N.J.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009.

Taylor, Mark C. *Erring: A Postmodern A/theology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984.

---. *Journeys to Selfhood: Hegel and Kierkegaard*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980.

---. *Kierkegaard's Pseudonymous Authorship: A Study of Time and the Self*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1975.

---. "Play." 06 Feb. 2008. The Social Science Research Council Blogs: The Immanent Frame: Secularism, Religion, and the Public Sphere. 06 May 2008. <http://www.ssrc.org/blogs/immanent_frame/2008/02/06/play>

Thirouin, Laurent. *Le Hasard et les règles: le modèle du jeu dans la pensée de Pascal*. Paris: J. Vrin, 1991.

Thompson, William Norman. *Gambling in America: An Encyclopedia of History, Issues, and Society.* Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2001.

Tullis, Paul. "The Death of Preschool." *Scientific American Mind* Nov. 2011: 36-41.

Turkle, Sherry. "Constructions and Reconstructions of the Self in Virtual Reality." Spiller

210-214.

---. *Second Self: Computers and the Human Spirit*. Cambridge, M.A.: MIT Press, 2005.

Turner, Victor. *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play*. New York: PAJ Publications, 1982.

Tynes, John. "Prismatic Play: Games as Windows on the Real World." Harrigan and Wardrip-Fruin 221-228.

U.N. General Assembly. *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. 217 A (III). 10 Dec. 1948. Web. 25 July 2011. <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/3ae6b3712c.html>

Verdenius, W.J. *Mimesis, Plato's Doctrine of Artistic Imitation and its Meaning to us*. Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1962.

Virno, Paolo. "Childhood and Critical Thought." Trans. Alessia Ricciardi. *Grey Room* 21 (2005): 6-12.

Von Neumann, John, and Oskar Morgenstern. *Theory of Games and Economic Behavior*. 3rd ed. New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1964.

Vygotsky, Lev. "Play and Its Role in the Mental Development of the Child." Trans. Catherine Mullholand. *Voprosy psikhologii* 6 (1966): n.p. *Marxists.org*. Web. May 29 2012.

Walker, Jill. "Fiction and Interaction: How Clicking on a Mouse Can Make You Part of a Fictional World." Diss. U. of Bergen, 2003.

Walsh, Sylvia. "Kierkegaard, Søren Aabye." *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*. Ed. Michael Kelly. Vol. 3. New York: Oxford UP, 1998. 63-65.

---. *Living Christianly: Kierkegaard's Dialectic of Christian Existence.* University Park, P.A.: Pennsylvania State UP, 2005.

Walton, Janet. "Imagination and Improvisation: The Holy Play of Congregational Worship." Union Theological Seminary. New York, N.Y. 29 Mar. 2011. Course Discussion.

---. "Improvisation and Imagination: Holy Play." *Worship* 75.4 (2001): 290-304.

Walton, Kendall L. *Mimesis as Make-Believe: On the Foundations of the Representational Arts*. Cambridge, M.A.: Harvard UP, 1990.

Wariboko, Nimi. *The Pentecostal Principle: Ethical Methodology in New Spirit*. Grand Rapids, M.I.: William B. Eerdmans, 2012.

Wark, McKenzie. *Gamer Theory*. Cambridge, M.A. Harvard UP, 2007.

---. *Telesthesia: Communication, Culture and Class*. Cambridge, U.K.: Polity Press, 2012.

Waskul, Dennis, and Matt Lust. "Role-Playing and Playing Roles: The Person, Player,

and Persona in Fantasy Role-Playing." *Symbolic Interaction* 27.3: 333-356.

Watson, Ben. *Derek Bailey and the Story of Free Improvisation*. London: Verso, 2004.

Watson, Gerard. *Phantasia in Classical Thought*. Galway, Ireland: Galway UP, 1988.

Weber, Max. "Science as a Vocation." *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*. Eds. H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills. New York: Oxford UP, 1946. 129-156.

Wells, Samuel. *Improvisation: The Drama of Christian Ethics*. Grand Rapids, M.I.: Brazos Press, 2004.

Wenner, Melinda. "The Serious Need for Play." *Scientific American Mind* Feb. 2009: 22-29.

Wetzel, James. "Infinite Return: Two Ways of Wagering with Pascal." *Religious Studies* 29.2 (1993): 139-149.

Williams, Rowan. "God and Risk (2)." Holloway 11-23.

Winnicott, D.W. *Playing and Reality*. London: Tavistock, 1971.

Wolf, Mark J.P., ed. *The Video Game Explosion: A History from PONG to PlayStation® and Beyond*. Westport, C.T.: Greenwood Press, 2008.

World of Warcraft. Blizzard Entertainment. Web. 23 Aug. 2012. <http://us.battle.net/wow/en/>

WoWWiki. Wikia. Web. 06 Feb. 2013. <http://www.wowwiki.com>

Yee, Nick. "The Demographics, Motivations and Derived Experiences of Users of Massively-Multiuser Online Graphical Environments." *PRESENCE: Teleoperators and Virtual Environments* 15 (2006): 309-329.

Young, Garry, and Monica Whitty. "Games Without Frontiers: On the Moral and Psychological Implications of Violating Taboos within Multi-player Virtual Spaces." *Computers in Human Behavior* 26 (2010): 1228-1236.

Zaloom, Caitlin. "The Derivative World." *The Hedgehog Review* (Summer 2010): 20-27.

Zhou, Zhongyun, Xiao-Ling Jin, Douglas R. Vogel, Yulin Fang, and Xiaojian Chen. "Individual Motivations and Demographic Differences in Social Virtual World Uses: An Exploratory Investigation in Second Life." *International Journal of Information Management* 31 (2011): 261-271.

Zizek, Slavoj. "From Virtual Reality to the Virtualization of Reality." *Electronic Culture: Technology and Visual Representation*. Ed. Timothy Druckrey. New York: Aperture Foundation, 1996. 290-295.

Appendix

§418 of Pascal's *Pensées*

(A.J. Krailsheimer's Translation)

Infinity – nothing. Our soul is cast into the body where it finds number, time, dimensions; it reasons about these things and calls them natural, or necessary, and can believe nothing else.

Unity added to infinity does not increase it at all, any more than a foot added to an infinite measurement: the finite is annihilated in the presence of the infinite and becomes pure nothingness. So it is with our mind before God, with our justice before divine justice. There is not so great a disproportion between our justice and God's as between unity and infinity.

God's justice must be as vast as his mercy. Now his justice towards the damned is less vast and ought to be less startling to us than his mercy towards the elect.

We know that the infinite exists without knowing its nature, just as we know that it is untrue that numbers are finite. Thus it is true that there is an infinite number, but we do not know what it is. It is untrue that it is even, untrue that it is odd, for by adding a unit it does not change its nature. Yet it is a number, and every number is even or odd. (It is true that this applies to every finite number.)

Therefore we may well know that God exists without knowing what he is.

Is there no substantial truth, seeing that there are so many true things which are not truth itself?

Thus we know the existence and nature of the finite because we too are finite and extended in space.

We know the existence of the infinite without knowing its nature, because it too has extension but unlike us no limits.

But we do not know either the existence or the nature of God, because he has neither extension nor limits.

But by faith we know his existence, through glory we shall know his nature.

Now I have already proved that it is quite possible to know that something exists without knowing its nature.

Let us speak now according to our natural lights.

If there is a God, he is infinitely beyond our comprehension, since, being indivisible and without limits, he bears no relation to us. We are therefore incapable of knowing either what he is or whether he is. That being so, who would dare to attempt an answer to the question? Certainly not we, who bear no relation to him.

Who then will condemn Christians for being unable to give rational grounds for their belief, professing as they do a religion for which they cannot give rational grounds? They declare that it is a folly, *stultitiam*, in expounding it to the world, and then you complain that they do not prove it. If they did prove it they would not be keeping their word. It is by being without proof that they show they are not without sense. 'Yes, but although that excuses those who offer their religion as such, and absolves them from the criticism of producing it without rational grounds, it does not absolve those who accept it.' Let us then examine this point, and let us say: 'Either God is or he is not.' But to which view shall we be inclined? Reason cannot decide this question. Infinite chaos separates us. At the far end of this infinite distance a coin is being spun which will come down heads or tails. How will you wager? Reason cannot make you choose either, reason cannot prove either wrong.

Do not condemn as wrong those who have made a choice, for you know nothing about it. 'No, but I will condemn them not for having made this particular choice, but

any choice, for, although the one who calls heads and the other one are equally at fault, the fact is that they are both at fault: the right thing is not to wager at all.'

Yes, but you must wager. There is no choice, you are already committed. Which will you choose then? Let us see: since a choice must be made, let us see which offers you the least interest. You have two things to lose: the true and the good, and two things to stake: your reason and your will, your knowledge and your happiness; and your nature has two things to avoid: error and wretchedness. Since you must necessarily choose, your reason is no more affronted by choosing one rather than the other. That is one point cleared up. But your happiness? Let us weigh up the gain and loss involved in calling heads that God exists. Let us assess the two cases: if you win you win everything, if you lose you lose nothing. Do not hesitate then; wager that he does exist. 'That is wonderful. Yes, I must wager, but perhaps I am wagering too much.' Let us see: since there is an equal chance of gain and loss, if you stood to win only two lives for one you could still wager, but supposing you stood to win three?

You would have to play (since you must necessarily play) and it would be unwise of you, once you are obliged to play, not to risk your life in order to win three lives at a game in which there is an equal chance of losing and winning. But there is an eternity of life and happiness. That being so, even though there were an infinite number of chances, of which only one were in your favour, you would still be right to wager one in order to win two; and you would be acting wrongly, being obliged to play, in refusing to stake one life against three in a game, where out of an infinite number of chances there is one in your favour, if there were an infinity of infinitely happy life to be won, one chance of winning against a finite number of chances of losing, and what you are staking is finite. That leaves no choice; wherever there is infinity, and where there are not infinite chances of losing against that of winning, there is no room for hesitation, you must give everything. And thus, since you are obliged to play, you must be renouncing reason if you hoard your life rather than risk it for an infinite gain, just as likely to occur as a loss amounting to nothing.

For it is no good saying that it is uncertain whether you will win, that it is certain that you are taking a risk, and that the infinite distance between the certainty of what you are risking and the uncertainty of what you may gain makes the finite good you are certainly risking equal to the infinite good that you are not certain to gain. This is not the case. Every gambler takes a certain risk for an uncertain gain without sinning against reason. Here there is no infinite distance between the certain risk and the uncertain gain: that is not true. There is, indeed, an infinite distance between the certainty of winning and the certainty of losing, but the proportion between the uncertainty of winning and the certainty of what is being risked is in proportion to the chances of winning or losing. And hence if there are as many chances on one side as on the other you are playing for even odds. And in that case the certainty of what you are risking is equal to the uncertainty of what you may win; it is by no means infinitely distant from it. Thus our argument carries infinite weight, when the stakes are finite in a game where there are even chances of winning and losing and an infinite prize to be won.

This is conclusive and if men are capable of any truth this is it.

'I confess, I admit it, but is there really no way of seeing what the cards are?' – 'Yes. Scripture and the rest, etc.' – 'Yes, but my hands are tied and my lips are sealed; I am being forced to wager and I am not free; I am being held fast and I am so made that I cannot believe. What do you want me to do then?' 'That is true, but at least get it into your head that, if you are unable to believe, it is because of your passions, since reason impels you to believe and yet you cannot do so. Concentrate then not on convincing yourself by multiplying proofs of God's existence but by diminishing your passions. You want to find faith and you do not know the road. You want to be cured of unbelief and you ask for the remedy: learn from those who were once bound like you and who now wager all they have. These people who know the road you wish to follow, who

have been cured of the affliction of which you wish to be cured: follow the way by which they began. They behaved just as if they did believe, taking holy water, having masses said, and so on. That will make you believe quite naturally, and will make you more docile [*abêtira*].' – 'But that is what I am afraid of.' – 'But why? What have you to lose? But to show you that this is the way, the fact is that this diminishes the passions which are your great obstacles …'

End of this address
'Now what harm will come to you from choosing this course? You will be faithful, honest, humble, grateful, full of good works, a sincere, true friend … It is true you will not enjoy noxious pleasures, glory and good living, but will you not have others?

'I tell you that you will gain even in this life, and that at every step you take along this road you will see that your gain is so certain and your risk so negligible that in the end you will realize that you have wagered on something certain and infinite for which you have paid nothing.'

'How these words fill me with rapture and delight!—'

'If my words please you and seem cogent, you must know that they come from a man who went down upon his knees before and after to pray this infinite and indivisible being, to whom he submits his own, that he might bring your being also to submit to him for your own good and for his glory: and that strength might thus be reconciled with lowliness.'