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## **Philosophizing Play**

**Wendy Russell and Emily Ryall**

This chapter brings a philosophical perspective to play as an essential feature of life through considering both what philosophers past and present have to say about it and the philosophy of play scholarship itself. The chapter begins by outlining the philosophic method (focusing on western philosophy) and providing a brief context. It then focuses upon three main areas of play scholarship. The first of these is play's nature, since it has been seen as activity, behavior, disposition, a particular form or structure, meaningful experience and a separate ontological phenomenon (Feezell, 2010). Second, it considers the ways in which philosophers have sought to categorize different forms of playing, drawing on Caillois' (1958; 2001) classifications of *agon*, *mimesis*, *alea* and *ilinx* as well his continuum from the structured and rule-bound *ludus* to the more spontaneous and emergent *paidia*. The third aspect is play's value, and here the discussion identifies key dualisms and paradoxes, including the desire to rationalize or irrationalize play's nature and value; the separation of work and play; and the role of status and power in philosophizing play's value (including generational differences). The chapter ends with a consideration of moral philosophy and, given what we know about playing, asks whether there can be an ethics of or for play.

### **Introduction**

Philosophy is perhaps best thought of as an activity rather than an academic discipline: it is the process of interrogating the big questions in human life, and also of reflecting on the manner of that interrogation. The word itself comes from Greek meaning loving (*philo*) wisdom (*sophia*). Philosophers ask questions about the nature of reality, happiness or beauty; what makes life worth living; how to live well, and so on. Historically, philosophy was less differentiated as an academic discipline than it is today. Ancient scholars were polymaths; that is, they studied many aspects of the natural and social world. The key disciplines that

today have something to say about play (for example biology, psychology, sociology) are comparatively recent, emerging out of the Enlightenment project in Europe and the American colonies of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that developed scientific method to understand phenomena previously explained through superstition, religion or philosophy. As scientific knowledge expanded, discrete academic disciplines emerged. Prior to this era play scholarship was largely the preserve of philosophers who reflected on a number of aspects of human life, not only play. They tended to take a less atomized approach than increasingly specialized academics. So, although Hellenic philosophers such as Plato (429–347 BCE) and Aristotle (384–322 BCE) had something to say about play, these thoughts are interwoven into their general writings rather than being discrete theories of play. It also shows that play scholarship within philosophy has a much longer history than the more recent disciplines.<sup>1</sup>

### **Branches of philosophy**

Philosophy has a number of branches that determine the kinds of questions philosophers ask. These have been grouped in varied ways by different scholars, illustrating how interrelated these branches are. For the purposes of this chapter, we have grouped the main branches of western philosophy into three: metaphysics, epistemology and axiology.

*Metaphysics* asks questions about the nature of the world. It also includes *ontology*, which is the study of being. Metaphysical questions about play might be about its nature or categories of forms of play. Metaphysicians may attempt to categorize play into different forms or consider the definition of play and ask whether it can be reduced to necessary and sufficient criteria.

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<sup>1</sup> As a guide to contextualizing the various pronouncements on play's nature and value in this chapter, we give dates after the first mention of a major philosopher unless we are citing a specific work, in which case we give the original date of the work followed by the date of publication of the edition used.

**Epistemology** is the study of knowledge and asks questions about the concept of knowledge; what knowledge is, how we can be sure we possess it, and what types of things we can know. Generally, it explores propositional knowledge (knowledge *that* something is true) rather than practical or procedural knowledge (knowing *how*) or non-propositional or personal knowledge (of people, places and so on). One definition of knowledge, generally accredited to Plato, is that it is ‘justified true belief’ (JTB): in order to know something, you have to believe it, you have to be justified in believing it, and it has to be true.<sup>2</sup>

The major sources of knowledge are perception, reason, memory, introspection and testimony (Audi, 2003); although different philosophers place different weight and value on some of these over others. For example, there are those who suggest that unless we can perceive something through our senses we cannot know it to be true (empiricists); others say that not everything can be perceived and so reason and other sources of knowledge are necessary (rationalists). Perhaps the most important thing is the requirement for philosophers to be skeptical: critical thinking requires the capacity to question, to doubt and to admit fallibility. This requirement to be skeptical can extend to epistemology itself. Empiricists (knowing through perceiving) and rationalists (knowing through reason) tend to seek singular truths that are claimed to be objective and neutral; this has been challenged by the social epistemologists (including feminist epistemologists), who assert that the basic premises that are assumed for much knowledge are culturally contingent and limited to the worldviews of those who claim neutral and universal truths. This can perhaps neatly be summed up in Simone de Beauvoir’s words:

Representation of the world, like the world itself, is the work of men; they describe it from their own point of view, which they confuse with the absolute truth (de Beauvoir, 1953: 162)

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<sup>2</sup> Although useful as a starting position, this definition has been subject to criticism, most notably by Edmund Gettier (1963).

Applying this to studies of play, and particularly children's play, it is possible to discern a dominant paradigm in minority world play scholarship that emanated from the classical theories of play. These were heavily influenced by Darwin and other evolutionary theorists and they have become embedded in 'common sense' understandings of the nature and value of both childhood and play. It is an adult representation of play, and may, as such, have more to say about adults than about children's subjective experiences of playing. It has been countered by academics from a range of disciplines who might loosely be grouped under the heading of postmodernism, and it is worth a brief excursion to explore this concept (and the modernism to which it is 'post'), since this is a fundamental aspect of epistemology affecting philosophical play scholarship.

Understandings of play have been heavily influenced by the intellectual and cultural *zeitgeist* of times and places, and by the worldviews of those pronouncing on its nature and value (mostly 'DWMs' - dead white males - from the higher echelons of society). In his seminal work on play and the aesthetic dimension in modern philosophical and scientific discourse, Mihai Spărosu (1989) suggests that this *zeitgeist* has swung between a pre-rational and a rational pole, with cultural paradigm shifts occurring alongside periods of crisis in established values (for example, transitions between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, the Baroque and the Age of Reason, the Age of Reason and Romanticism). Although, as its name suggests, the pre-rational predates the rational, it has by no means been superseded by it and indeed there continues to be a tension between these poles. Postmodernism, for example, reflects a moment in the history of philosophizing play that belongs to the pre-rational and is a reaction against the excesses of the modern, Enlightenment period, where rational, scientific methods were rigorously and objectively applied to phenomena in order to arrive at universal and generalizable truths. Initially, this era was itself a reaction against previous ways of knowing that were based on superstition, folklore, myth or religion. Its goal was to

pull humanity from these dark ages into the light of scientific knowledge and towards progress, largely understood as man's efforts to control the vagaries of nature for his own ends. Postmodernism suggests that the nature of the contemporary world is such that these rational explanations are no longer adequate and can be challenged on a number of levels. Henricks (2001: 51) describes the contemporary postmodern world as a place where former certainties have melted away, abiding truths seem no longer possible, and where

indeterminacy, even chaos, reign, where fantasy and reality intersect without warning, where multiplicity and fragmentation are the normal state of affairs. What sounds like the makings of a far-fetched science fiction novel is intended quite seriously as a description of our contemporary world. And, perhaps most strikingly, it is a kingdom ruled by play.

For postmodern philosophers, play becomes more the play of the world rather than a phenomenon of it that can be explained in terms of individual subjectivity or development, or collective progress.

*Logic* is often cited as a branch of philosophy in its own right, since it explores the rules by which philosophy is performed. Here we consider it as a sub-branch of epistemology, since it is concerned with the consistency and validity of arguments that make truth claims, rather than whether or not such claims are true. A classic structure of an argument is "If *X* and *Y*, then *Z*." So, one argument might go something like this:

1. The sole purpose of the period of childhood is for children to learn the skills needed for adult life
2. Play is a defining feature of childhood therefore
3. The sole purpose of children's play is to enable the learning of skills and knowledge required in adulthood.

For an argument like this, known as a syllogism, to be valid, the conclusion necessarily follows from the premises that precede it. So, if assertions 1 and 2 above are true, conclusion

3 is also true. So this argument is valid, but in order for it to be sound, the premises need to be true also.

*Axiology* is the study of values: what the nature of value is, what has value, and whether the object of value is a subjective state or something objective and measurable. Again, the term comes from the Greek *axios* meaning worth, and *logos* meaning science. It is often divided into two subsets: *aesthetics*, which explores the nature of beauty, and *ethics*, which asks questions about what is good and bad and how we arrive at these decisions.

*Ethics* is the study of how we should live our lives, and normative ethical theory seeks to define how we might arrive at these decisions. Applying ethics to play is not straightforward. If play is seen as a good in itself, it does not necessarily follow that play itself is morally good. Huizinga (1938, 1955: 6), who offers a historical insight into play, suggests not:

Play lies outside the antithesis of wisdom and folly, and equally outside those of truth and falsehood, good and evil. Although it is a non-material activity it has no moral function. The valuations of vice and virtue do not apply here.

And yet Huizinga also states that, although play and seriousness might be seen as opposites, in that play is set apart from ordinary everyday existence and survival, this does not mean that it is trivial or that it cannot therefore address sublime and serious issues of a moral nature. Here we come up against the first of several paradoxes of play explored in this chapter. Play is often set apart from the necessities and realities of survival, described as *as if* behavior, where aspects of life can be subject to either mimicry or mockery (Sutton-Smith, 1999), where actions are exaggerated or incomplete, and where the rules of the real world (and therefore the consequences of not observing them) are temporarily suspended. In this sense, the normal rules of morality may not apply, and yet they do, since play is not entirely separated from reality. Philosophers who offer rational explanations of play, for example, Plato, Kant (1724–1804) and Schiller (1759–1805), differentiate ‘good’ and ‘bad’ play, which challenges the notion of play as an inherently intrinsic good. Others have seen value



in play's embodied disorderliness and nonsense, in being able to suspend the rules for normal behavior for the duration of playing, allowing for acts that may otherwise be understood as disruptive of order, disturbing or even immoral (for example, Nietzsche [1844–1900] and Bakhtin [1895-1975]).

There is broad agreement, however, that all play, from the most structured sports and games to moments of shared playful nonsense, is rule bound (either explicitly or tacitly): in order for players to understand that what is taking place is playful, they have to agree to be bound by the conventions that allow the rules of ordinary existence to be temporarily suspended. In other words, as Gregory Bateson (1955) showed, players metacommunicate, through any number of rules, rituals, signals and other forms of communication, that *this is play*. Ethical play, therefore, might well be applied to the notion of the well-played game, where players agree to play by the rules of the game, whatever they may be and however disorderly they may be.

*Aesthetics*, in its narrowest sense, refers to the philosophy of art, but it often extends beyond this. Returning to Huizinga (1955: 7):

[A]lthough the attribute of beauty does not attach to play as such, play nevertheless tends to assume marked elements of beauty. Mirth and grace adhere at the outset to the more primitive forms of play. In play the beauty of the human body in motion reaches its zenith. In its more developed forms it is saturated with rhythm and harmony, the noblest gifts of aesthetic perceptions known to man. Many and close are the links that connect play with beauty. All the same, we cannot say that beauty is inherent in play.

Some philosophers, most notably Kant and Schiller, have made strong links between play and aesthetics. In contemporary game design theory (often called 'ludology'), the term aesthetics is often used to refer to the emotional aspects of interactive, screen-based game playing: not just the intellectual appreciation of design realism and technique, but the embodied engagement of all senses with the interactive game (see, for example, Perron, 2005).

There is, within philosophy, a broader *value theory* that does not restrict itself to ethics and aesthetics, and here we see arguments that may pertain more generally to play scholarship. Of particular interest is the debate regarding *intrinsic* (something that is good in itself, for its own sake) and *instrumental* (something that is good because it serves a particular purpose) value. There has been much debate about whether instrumental goods ultimately lead to intrinsic goods (with the ultimate intrinsic good being happiness), whereas others say that there are no intrinsic goods (Zimmerman, 2010). Since play is often described as intrinsically motivated, or as *autotelic* (having a purpose in and of itself and not for any end), these discussions are particularly apposite.

### **Philosophy as play**

Before we turn to a detailed consideration of play's nature, forms and value from a philosophical perspective, we take a brief detour into the concept of philosophy itself as play.

Plato himself saw philosophy as 'a joyful game' (Ardley, 1967: 226):

Play is not an incidental sop with which to beguile the reader; it is the very stuff of good argument.

Fecundity, genuine seriousness, real understanding, are to be found only in aerial flights of play;

without play, our intellectual exertions lead but to fatuous solemnities.

The frivolous, agonistic and formulaic game-playing of the sophists as portrayed by Plato are of a different order to the serious playfulness of dialogue and dialectics; indeed Plato viewed the former as false play. The term 'sophist' came into use in Greece in the fifth century BCE and was used to describe itinerant teachers and philosophers that toured the cities charging for their lectures and debates. Although many were serious philosophers, the way in which the term has come to be used is to describe tricksters more interested in winning an argument through persuasion than in truth or knowledge. This may have come about because much of the material on famous sophists is to be found in the writings of Plato who sought to present Socrates as a genuine philosopher and the sophists as charlatans (Taylor and Lee, 2012).

Huizinga's (1955) portrayal of them is to see the riddles and the tricks of persuasion and

rhetoric as forms of play. He suggests that serious philosophy and the worst excesses of sophistry are not mutually exclusive opposites; much creative thinking has elements of play and although the agonistic nature of the dialogues and debates of the sophists may have placed more value on formulaic rhetoric than enquiry or truth, ‘sometimes a childish pun or a shallow witticism misses profundity by but a hair’s breadth’ (p151).

Ardley (1967: 227) identifies playful philosophers, who stand out from the crowd of those who were ‘too serious to be really serious’, at least in some of their works if not all: Plato, Aristotle, St Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274), Berkley (1685-1753), Kierkegaard (1813-1855), Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881), the later Wittgenstein (1889-1951).

More recently, Ermanno Bencivenga (1994: ix) continues this thread in the Preface to his own collection of three dialogues:

I have become convinced that [dialogue] is the most lively, most valid aspect of doing philosophy ... but the public is not exposed to this aspect; in public, philosophers usually present themselves in a serious, formal way, acting as experts, furrowing their brows, and offering none of the excitement, of the intense, sensual taste that feeds their research. This is wrong, morally wrong: everyone has a right to this excitement, to this taste, to this play.

So, in sum, the branches of philosophy considered in this chapter are metaphysics (the nature and form of play), epistemology (how do we know what we know about play) and axiology (what is play’s value as expressed in knowledge about its purpose, its relation with aesthetics, and ethical considerations pertaining to play). We move now to consider what philosophers have had to say about these elements of play.

### **The nature of play**

It makes sense to begin our exploration of philosophical discussions about play by considering the nature of the phenomenon under investigation, as the way in which play is conceptualized necessarily influences how it is defined, classified and valued. Randolph Feezell (2010), a contemporary philosopher of sport, offers a useful starting point in his

article on the metaphysics of play, and we use his categorization here. He opens by reflecting on the heterogeneity and diversity of play, and particularly the problem of what phenomena might be contained within the concept of playing. There is considerable disagreement on this. Is sport play? Can art be play? What about the difference between games and play? If we ‘play’ a role in life, or ‘play’ a musical instrument, can this be included in any definition of play? One way to approach this is to consider what kind of phenomenon play might be.

Feezell (2010) offers five metaphysical conceptualizations, which we expand upon.

*1. Play as behavior or activity:* In a sense, this is the most straightforward and most commonly assumed way of understanding the nature of play. After all, it is the bits of playing that we can see, so it would, presumably, keep the empiricists happy as a conceptualization of the nature of play. Seeing play as an activity implies that it is something that takes place within a discrete time and space, has a clear beginning and end. It is easy to see, therefore, why such a conceptualization might lead to lists of specific activities such as games, sport, the arts, philosophy, education and leisure.

*2. Play as motive, attitude or state of mind:* As Feezell points out, the fact that play is understood as autotelic, that is, it is engaged in for its own sake and not any other instrumental purpose, leads us to ponder on the motivation for play. Feezell suggests that play cannot be only a state of mind, since it does require some form of activity to which one brings what Suits (2005) terms a ‘lusory attitude’. Mere attitude with no activity is unlikely to be play. Yet playfulness, or a lusory attitude, can be applied to activities that might otherwise not be considered to be play. Whilst play *can* be an activity that takes place in a specific place at a specific time, playfulness as a disposition can lighten the mundanity of the demands of everyday life. Thus, it becomes impossible to say that certain activities are (always) play, simply because one may approach them with or without a playful disposition (Malaby, 2008).

3. *Play as form or structure*: Conceptualizing play as non-serious is to give it a particular form or structure. Schiller's concept of the play drive or instinct moves the conceptualization of play away from activity or motive and more towards a structure or 'grammar' that allows for freedom within the constraints of the rules of the metaphorical game (Gill, 2012). Formal games have explicit rules, but open-ended, emergent playing also has a structure that the players have to acknowledge in order for the play to continue. For Carse (1987) there are two kinds of game in the game of life: finite and infinite. With finite games, the purpose is to win; whereas with infinite games the purpose is to keep the game going. Finite games have fixed rules; if you break the rules, you are no longer playing the game. Infinite games have rules that can be adapted as the play progresses; indeed it is this that keeps the game going. Whilst Carse intends this is a metaphor for life, the same may be applied literally to play and games.

4. *Play as meaningful experience*: Feezell suggests that the meaning that arises in play is both subjective, a psychological feature of the agent, and a formal element of the activity. These are not mutually exclusive but interdependent, even if some attempts at representing subjective meaning lean more towards one than the other. He lists a number of features that have characterized play, and each of these can be applied in these two (inner and manifest) ways:

Play is activity characterized by freedom, separateness, nonseriousness, illusion, unreality, delimitation of space and time, isolation, purposelessness, order, make-believe, a play world, superfluousness, suspension of the ordinary, internal or intrinsic meaning, inherent attraction, unalienated participation, internal purposiveness, serious nonseriousness, diminished consciousness of self, unselfing, absorption, responsive openness, attunement, experience of difficulty, overcoming obstacles, risk-taking, finitude, narrative structure, unity, contingency, possibility, uncertainty, spontaneity, improvisation—and fun. I'm sure I have not exhausted the possibilities! (Feezell, 2010: 158).

Similarly, the meanings of the play for the player are both attitudinal and experiential. For example, the structure of the rules of play help to separate it from everyday ordinary life

creating a freedom from these cares and constraints that is experiential and is supported through a lusory attitude.

In his ontological examination of children's play, John Wall (2013) suggests that the meanings of play for the player cannot be fully known by others, and he applies this to the subjective, attitudinal and experiential meaning of play for children. Traditionally, adults have imposed their own meanings onto children's play; Wall argues for an alternative perspective that values children's own experiences of playing.

*5. Play as an ontologically distinct phenomenon:* Extending the paradox and interrelationship of inner and manifest/shared meaning of play as a subjective attitude or experience, some have suggested (for example, Gadamer [1900-2002]) that rather than the players playing the play, the play plays the players; in other words, play is a phenomenon that arises as something distinct from the individual and shared experiences of the players. We see this in the way the term is used in language, when we talk of things such as the play of light, the play of forces, and playing on words.

Feezell concludes his metaphysical explorations on the nature of play by promoting a pluralist conceptualization that strikes some kind of balance between embracing every conceptualization of play and an essentialist, reductive and narrow understanding.

### **Play's characteristics: towards a definition?**

Philosophy, alongside all other disciplines, has struggled to define play. This is partly because of play's paradoxical nature, its ambivalent status both ontologically and epistemologically, being seen as 'a mixture of reality and irreality, of truth and illusion' (Spurius, 1989: 2). It is also partly due to different approaches of philosophy, and here we return to the question of epistemology. The Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951) offered, in his early work *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (Wittgenstein, 1921; 2001a), a logical explanation of the relation between the world, thought and language. The structure

of language limits what can be said about the world and therefore what can be meaningfully thought, and Wittgenstein argued that what can be said about the world represents the limits of philosophy. Anything beyond this – metaphysics, ethics, religion, for example – cannot be discussed without it being nonsense. It is not so much that the phenomena themselves are nonsensical, but what can be said about them. Wittgenstein's later work (Wittgenstein, 2001b) took a different perspective on language, moving from the metaphor of language as a picture towards the idea of 'language-games'. Language is embedded in its cultural usage and so meanings will be particular to context rather than objective and generalizable. Rather than a fixed representation of reality, language becomes fluid, an activity. Here, Wittgenstein is raising a challenge to the analytical premise that definitions of phenomena need to meet the 'necessary and sufficient' condition (Biletzki and Matar, 2011), that is, any statement that might define play, for example, should include those characteristics that are necessary for the phenomenon to be play (what delineates it from other phenomena such as, for example, 'real life') and sufficient in that it includes the whole of the phenomenon (all forms of playing, for example). A fixed definition of play, he might have argued, would be a picture that holds us captive for we cannot move beyond it and it is repeated until it becomes seen as an immutable truth. Yet, given the contextual variability of language, such fixed definitions would be 'disguised nonsense'. His notion of 'family resemblances' illustrates that a word might point to a variety of different uses even though those uses might not obviously bear relation to each and every other use. So the word 'play' can be used in a number of contexts, such as playing a sport or musical instrument, playing with ideas, playing at schools, playing the giddy goat, playing a role in something, the play of light, and so on. On games themselves (the German word *Spiel* encompasses both games and play), Wittgenstein said they could not be defined, since all that could be found was a series of family resemblance rather than a set of necessary and sufficient conditions (Ryall, 2013).

This is seen by philosopher of sport, Bernard Suits, as a metaphorical throwing down of a philosophical gauntlet, which he picks up, defying what he calls ‘terminal Wittgensteinians’ who exhibit anxiety and melancholy in the face of attempts at definitions (Suits, 1977: 117). He sets to, working to a set of necessary and sufficient conditions, and offers both a definition of games (Suits, 1978; 2005) and also a definition of play (Suits, 1977). His definition of play is so brief that it will not be readily recognisable to those accustomed to seeing a list of characteristics that define and delimit play. It is

[A] temporary reallocation to autotelic activities of resources primarily committed to instrumental purposes (Suits 1977: 124).

Of course, this definition has been critiqued, but on close inspection, it does contain within its precision many of the characteristics that other, perhaps more familiar definitions contain. For example, Suits states that for activities to be seen as play, they need to be autotelic, undertaken for their own sake. This has been challenged (Schmid, 2011), but the notion of autotelicity is present in most attempts at defining play. However, Suits says that autotelicity is a necessary, but not sufficient description of playing. That is, not all autotelic activity is necessarily play. So an analytical and comprehensive definition needs more. That ‘more’ is, as Suits (1977: 119) says, ‘a genus in search of a difference’. And that difference is *seriousness*. Play is separate from instrumental activities, the business of survival, what might be called work. In an ingenious adaptation of Schopenhauer’s theory of play as the expending of surplus energy, Suits suggests that applying the theory to humans (rather than other animals) requires that ‘energy’ becomes more general ‘resources’ and that ‘superfluous’ becomes, in fact, superfluous, since humans play when there is both a superfluity and a scarcity of resources. To clarify this last point, rather than talking of superfluous resources, it is a question of those resources (energy, ideas, materials, time, and so on) being used not for instrumental but autotelic ends whether they are superfluous or not. What Suits’ definition does do is allow a contingent application of the definition, offering to an extent some



resolution of the play/not-play dichotomy that arises in absolute definitions, through the use of the word ‘temporary’. If our whole time were spent in playing, there would be no ‘real life’ outside which play could sit, no separation of play from the ordinary instrumental activities of day-to-day survival. Play would no longer be a form of respite from the rigours and boredoms of real life, it would be real life. And therefore not play.<sup>3</sup> So, although those of an analytical persuasion have had great fun deconstructing and critiquing Suits’ definition of play, we can see how it does, in fact, encompass very precisely the key characteristics that others have listed.

Suits’ treatment of the vexed question of defining play is analytical and logical. Other schools of thought and philosophical movements assert that play, because of its very nature, cannot be submitted to analysis or logic in this fashion because it is, in some sense ‘unthinkable’. Spariosu (1989: 3) suggests that all attempts to offer ‘a supposedly value-free or neutral description may turn out to be historical products of our culture’. He continues:

One should therefore consider play not in a universal light – that would soon lead to paradox and aporia – but in the concrete historical context of our world... one can “define” play by what it does, by its function, rather than what it means. Indeed, Wittgenstein would argue a word’s meaning coincides with its use; this is to say, one can examine play as a concept or a speculative tool that has been put to certain uses and has fulfilled certain functions in Western thought.

### **Play forms**

In this section, we draw mainly on the work of Roger Caillois (2001), using his four classifications of forms of play as a basis for the following section on play’s value. We also introduce the work of Mihai Spariosu (1989), who brings a philosophical gaze to a similar classification of play forms and how these forms have been philosophized throughout history and across cultures.

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<sup>3</sup> This is best exemplified by Suits’ (2005) Grasshopper when his notion of utopia as a life of game-playing, ultimately self-destructs.

Caillois begins his classification of play and games by suggesting that they can be placed on a continuum between *paidia* and *ludus*. *Paidia* describes the kinds of playing that are characterized by ‘diversion, turbulence, free improvisation, and carefree gaiety ... frolicsome and impulsive exuberance’, whereas *ludus* contains this openness and emergence by imposing conventions that are ‘arbitrary, imperative and purposely tedious’ so that the game becomes more formally rule bound and also requires more ‘effort, patience, skill, or ingenuity’ (Caillois, 2001: 13). Caillois was writing in French, and the French word *jeu*, in a similar way to the German *spiel*, means both *play* and *games*, and so this may account for his conflation of two distinct phenomena over which anglophones have argued. Nevertheless, the continuum applies well to play generally, highlighting the ‘ever-present tension in play between improvisation and rule observance’ (Henricks, 2011: 178).

Caillois’ four classifications of play are *agôn* (competition), *alea* (chance), *mimicry* (simulation) and *ilinx* (vertigo), although he qualifies this by saying that ‘these designations do not cover the entire universe of play’ (Caillois, 2001: 12-13). We can see parallels here with Spariosu’s (1989) classification of play concepts, which he terms *agon*, *chance-necessity*, *mimesis* and *freedom*. Both Caillois and Spariosu consider (as does Huizinga) how play is manifest across different cultures and periods, particularly looking at the extent to which ancient, less mediated forms of playing became rationalized during the modern period and then again ‘pre-rationalized’ by the postmodernists.

*Agôn*: In ancient, pre-rational cultures (for example, presocratic Greece), *agôn*, seen as the violent play of power, was a dominant play form. There was heroic virtue in fighting and winning battles, and the forces of nature were understood as the agonistic play of violent, impetuous and unpredictable gods. In its rational form, this raw and violent power becomes a simulation tightly controlled by standardised rules and conventions. These create the

conditions by which contestants compete in such a way that it is skill, ingenuity, speed, strength or other mental or physical quality that determines the winner.

*Alea/chance-necessity*: Closely linked to *agôn* is *alea* (the Latin name for the game of dice). In its pre-rational form this is the unpredictability of the *kosmos* and the struggle to survive against the whims of the gods and natural forces. In its rational form, this becomes rule-bound games of chance and risk-taking such as gambling, bingo, roulette, lotteries and so on. In both *agôn* and *alea*, might wins out in pre-rational forms, whereas justice and ideas of fair play regulate rational forms. In *agôn*, winning is a question of skill, in *alea*, the player has no control over the outcome of the game, it is entirely down to luck or fate.

*Agôn* in its rational form of competitive games requires that the players display and perfect their skill; *alea* is the opposite of this. In *agôn* players rely entirely upon themselves and their performance; in *alea* they rely on everything but themselves and surrender to destiny.

*Mimicry/mimesis*: If *agôn* and *alea* are ways for players to escape the problems and boredoms of the real world, *mimicry*, in Caillois' definition, is a way of escaping themselves by becoming someone or something else. Here, the rule of the game is to agree to suspend disbelief, to abide by the shared agreement that this is pretence but nonetheless real enough within the game. Theatre, carnival, children's pretend play all fall into this category. In its pre-rational form, *mimesis* is more a question of presenting rather than representing – that is, in the sense of calling something forth, through hypnotic rhythms, chants or dancing. In theatre, performance techniques such as music, special effects and so on help the audience identify with the player and so experience the emotions being invoked. We understand this in its rational form as the catharsis of tragedy or the vitality of emotions aroused in horror films or comedies. Spurius extends the rational form of *mimesis* into an *as if* play of reason as a part of creative cognitive processes in problems of knowledge and truth.

*Ilinx*: Ilinx is the Greek word for whirlpool, and Caillois has adopted it to refer to those forms of play where the player deliberately seeks disequilibrium purely for the sensations it invokes. Caillois (2001: 23) describes it as ‘an attempt to momentarily destroy the stability of perception and inflict a kind of voluptuous panic upon an otherwise lucid mind’. We see this in children who deliberately spin round and round to make themselves dizzy – or indeed in whirling dervishes. It can also include many of the so-called adrenalin sports such as bungee jumping and fairground rides, and forms of intoxication. The aim is to feel the exhilaration of temporary disequilibrium – or even fear – and to survive and return to normal.

*Freedom*: this is Spariosu’s final play concept. In its pre-rational guise, the sense of freedom is closely linked to displays of power such as the unconstrained play of forces in *agôn* and *alea*. In its rational form, social conventions provide a frame within which freedoms can be experienced, as in the rituals of carnival or other situations where normal rules no longer apply. This form of freedom is also seen as a release from everyday responsibilities, giving rise to the dualism of play and work.

Following this brief introduction to classifications of forms of play, we now turn to consider how these forms of play are valued.

### **The value of play**

Caillois’ opening gambit is that

Play is an occasion of pure waste: waste of time, energy, ingenuity, skill and often money

(Caillois, 2001: 5-6).

It may follow, therefore, and many have argued it, that play has no value; but others have found an argument to say that its value lies precisely in the fact that play makes no direct contribution to what the evolutionists term the ‘struggle for survival’. Rationalizing a value for play highlights many of its key paradoxes, including that between intrinsic and instrumental value, the opposition of play and work, and the role of status and power in the control of play. If we return to Spariosu’s hypothesis that western mentality generally, and

therefore the philosophy of play, has swung between pre-rational and rational poles, this provides a basis for looking at these paradoxes.

We start our mostly chronological journey in this section with classical Greece, with Plato (429–347 BCE). Plato is held up as one of the most influential figures in the history of philosophy, often being seen as the father of philosophy in the way it is now conducted. Most of his work is presented in the form of dialogues and focused on ethics and the nature of virtues, political philosophy, metaphysics and epistemology (and particularly method).

### **Plato**

Play was central to the work of Plato. His dialogues are often witty and on occasion it is not always easy to tell if the characters, especially Socrates as the narrator-philosopher, is serious or playing the trickster. For Plato, play is the foundation of all education, from children, starting with music and gymnastics, through to dialogue (*dialectic*) as the pinnacle of philosophy. In the original Greek, the words for play (*paidia*), children (*paides*) and teaching (*pedagogy*) all share the same etymological root (Hunnicut, 1990). We see here a rationalization of play that highlights communal instrumental future benefit that, as we shall see, can only be achieved if the proper kinds of play are encouraged by teachers. Given the importance of playfulness in the highest forms of philosophy, Plato does not set up play and work as opposites. In addition, Plato promoted the concept of leisure (*scholē*), not because he disdained work, but because it was a form of freedom. In this sense, such liberation is for the elite, but this is a meritocratic elite. For Plato, a noble aristocrat was superior by virtue through education rather than through wealth or birth. He was critical of those who became slaves to work in order to amass excessive wealth. Leisure, however, was not idleness, it was to be spent in the activity to which humans are best suited, and for Plato, this was ‘thinking, knowing, conversing, creating, and loving’ (Hunnicut, 1990: 215).

Plato sees a clear distinction between good ('law-abiding') and bad play. Hunnicutt (1990) identifies three forms of bad play in Plato's writings: frivolity, false-play and false-seriousness. Play needs to be guided towards its ultimate goal, namely the education of future citizens for the just city and the pursuit of Good. Teaching children music instills a sense of order, and this is set against other childish forms of lawless, frivolous play. Worse than frivolity is false play. This can be seen in the trickeries of the sophists who deceive and manipulate for extrinsic gain such as money, status or revenge. Plato also criticizes false seriousness. Although he considers representational art forms to be appropriate for children's education if properly guided, he deems them unsuitable for adults. *Mimesis* involves mimicking the world, representing through painting or drawing what is already a reflection of reality. Understanding this concept requires an explanation of one of Plato's foundational beliefs, that of Forms. The world inhabited by humans is but an imperfect reflection of another world where Forms are perfect. So to represent the imperfect forms of our world is a representation twice removed and yet these representations are taken seriously and given their own truth and meaning. In this way, art disguises as serious those things that are in fact playful representations of pure Forms.

For Plato, therefore, philosophy for adults consisted in correcting these three forms of bad play. Philosophy can and indeed should be playful not for personal gain, as with the sophists, but for the pursuit of knowledge and Good. Yet all this too is play, since the world is an illusion (Hunnicutt, 1990). This last point opens up a paradox in Plato's philosophy. Given that the world is an imperfect reflection of the ideal world, none of the affairs of the human world can be taken seriously, including play.

It is necessary to be serious with the serious, but not with the not serious. The divine alone is worthy by nature of all blessed seriousness. But human being, as we have said before, has been created as a plaything of the gods, and that is the best part of us. All of us, then, men and women alike, must live accordingly, and spend our lives making our play as noble and beautiful as

possible—which is the very opposite of contemporary thinking (Plato's *Laws*, Book VII, 803c, cited in Hyland, 1977: 36).

### **Aristotle**

Aristotle (384–322 BCE) was Plato's student and an equally influential philosopher. As with Plato, Aristotle's ideas continue to influence our thinking today. His work spanned a vast range of topics, but our focus here is on his work on politics and ethics. Here Aristotle wrote on the best way to live a good life. His concept of *eudaimonia* has been translated as happiness, flourishing or living well. It is more than pleasure or honor and requires that we fully realize our full potential through developing virtues and practical wisdom. The purpose of the State (*polis*) is to promote human flourishing, and his political ideas are based on a meritocratic justice rather than aristocratic sense of entitlement or a democratic sense of equality for all regardless of merit (Shields, 2012).

Aristotle makes a distinction between play (*paidia*) and leisure (*scholē*). Play for children provides the basis for exploration, practice and application, and is directed towards developing the right virtues and wisdom for future citizenship (Neuman, 1974). For adults Aristotle sees it as relaxation from the necessities of life (*ascholē*, which may translate as work or business). Leisure, on the other hand is the *telos* of life and for Aristotle, as for Plato, this is the life spent in active contemplation (philosophy) and is a life of freedom (Solmsen, 1964).

So, for both Plato and Aristotle, play is rationalized and the right kinds of play are given an instrumental value in terms of its role in developing wisdom, virtues and citizenship.

Aristotle's ideas about play resurface one and a half centuries later in the ideas of the late medieval philosopher St Thomas of Aquinas (1225–1274).

### **St Thomas of Aquinas**

The medieval period runs approximately from 400CE until about 1400CE, a period between the fall of the Roman Empire and the Renaissance. There is less written about this period than

the classic Greek era or the Enlightenment that follows, and even less in this literature that addresses the topic of play. The main influences on thinking of this time were the writings of Roman scholars (as the main language was Latin) and Christianity, with many philosophers also being religious scholars or within religious orders. There was little continuity between the classic Greek philosophers and European medieval ones until the early twelfth century when Latin translations of their work began to appear, resulting in major changes in thought (MacDonald and Kretzman, 1998). Aquinas falls into this later era, and he was indeed heavily influenced by the work of Aristotle. As we saw earlier, play, for Aquinas, was a necessary break from work, and particularly from contemplative or intellectual work: it was recreation for the soul. Play is seen as something undertaken for its own sake but we need to find an Aristotelian golden mean between excess and deficiency of play. Play should not be excessively injurious, offensive or unruly, having regard to both other people and to the circumstances of the situation. Too little play leads to boorishness. With reason being our guide, we should aim for the golden mean between boorishness and frivolity (*Summa Theologica*, Question 168).

What Plato, Aristotle and Aquinas all have in common is the notion that only some forms of playing have value, and that value is highly rationalized and highly instrumental, aimed towards developing people to the fullest of their potential and to become good citizens. The more 'base' forms of sensuous, bodily play and those that disrupt or mock the established order are to be eschewed. We turn now to look at these forms of play in the work of Rabelais and Bakhtin.

### **François Rabelais and Mikhail Bakhtin**

François Rabelais (1494-1553) was a French writer, monk and Greek scholar from the Renaissance period. His best known work is a series of five books on the lives of two giants, *Gargantua and Pantagruel*. The stories are satirical, bawdy, crude and violent. This is indeed



the opposite end of the spectrum to the higher transcendental forms of play that we have so far considered. These stories were studied by the Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975), leading to his theory of the role of the carnivalesque in Renaissance social systems (Bakhtin, 1984). Carnival can be seen as pre-rational mimetic playing that has a paradoxical relationship with the powerful ruling elite of the church or feudal lords. Festivals and carnivals may be sanctioned by the powerful and their value rationalized as recreation and a temporary relaxing of social rules, but Bakhtin (1984: 4) suggests there is more to it than that:

The scope and importance of this culture were immense in the Renaissance and Middle Ages. A boundless world of humorous forms and manifestations opposed the official and serious tone of medieval ecclesiastical and feudal culture. In spite of their variety, folk festivities of the carnival type, the comic rites and cults, the clowns and fools, giants, dwarfs, and jugglers, the vast and manifold literature of parody – all these forms have one style in common: they belong to one culture of folk carnival humor.

Serious ceremonies also had their clowns and jokers who mimicked and mocked the rituals. Such carnivalesque rituals had a long tradition and were common across the whole of medieval Europe, being distinct from official festivals and ceremonies. Carnival marked the temporary abandonment of hierarchy, norms, order and prohibitions. They provided a frame within which these could be resisted and mocked. They created a kind of second world, one based on humor and laughter, on feasting and revelry, in which everyone participated and where, for a time, they ‘entered the utopian realm of community, freedom, equality and abundance’ (Bakhtin, 1984: 9).

Following this brief foray into play as pre-rational mimesis, we enter the Enlightenment period and return once more to the rationalization of play, but continuing our focus on mimesis, this time as the expression of the aesthetic.

### **Immanuel Kant**

The German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) was a leading figure in the Enlightenment, a movement that was characterized by the scientific method and ideals of freedom and equality founded on principles of reason. Given this, it is not surprising that Kant's ideas about play are firmly fixed in reason and the mind rather than the corporeality of Rabelaisian carnival. Although many of his ideas reflect those of classical Greek philosophers, he is at pains to separate out play and work, dismissing the dialogic approach to philosophy (and particularly the agonistic excesses of the sophists) as 'mere play' and arguing for serious scientific work from empirical and rational foundations. Yet Kant acknowledges that it is not possible to know all phenomena through the senses or through reason, so there is a place for the free play of ideas as a mediator between reason and understanding. These ideas are developed in his writing on aesthetics, *Critique of Pure Judgment*. In his discussion on judging the beauty of an object, Kant tried to address the dilemma of avoiding objectivity and yet making some claim to universal validity and he does this through his concept of the free play of imagination and understanding. This is very different from a sensuous form play and is contained within the rules of understanding of concepts and yet is free because there are no concepts to constrain the imagination, what Kant refers to as lawfulness without a law (Ginsborg, 1997).

As well as Kant's ideas about play in the realm of cognition, he also considers other aspects of play in society in his *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*. Play is seen here as having some benefits, including rest from work, the social and civilizing value of games and the joy of childhood play, but there is a cautionary note here too, as overindulgence in these forms of play may lead to laziness, bad habits and a dulling of mental capacities. Indeed, as Spariosu (1989: 51-52) says:

Once we give up the rules of Reason, we become the helpless toys of the irrational. It is this arbitrary, chaotic, and uncontrollable play that Kant constantly runs up against and attempts to come to terms with in his philosophical thought. The irrational relentlessly haunts him, in the *Ding*

*an sich*, in the free, spontaneous, and unruly play of the intuition and the imagination, in the disjunctive play between the similar and the dissimilar, in the disparity between the beautiful and the sublime, in the divided moral nature of man, in the cosmic interplay of necessity and chance, in the inscrutable designs of Nature.

## Schiller

Friedrich Schiller (1759-1805) was a German philosopher who developed Kant's ideas on play and aesthetics. In his *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1795; 2006), he speaks of a play drive or, in some translations from the German, a play instinct (*Spieltrieb*). This drive mediates the troublesome dialectic of the human condition, that between sensuous bodily desire, material instinct (*Stofftrieb* or *Sinnestrieb*) and the form instinct of pure reason and spirit (*Formtrieb*) that, unmediated, reduces individuals to the mere idea of the species. Between, and in the conjoining of, pure reason and pure sensuality lies beauty, the highest ideal, and this is the play instinct:

The sensuous impulsion excludes from its subject all autonomy and freedom; the formal impulsion excludes all dependence and passivity. But the exclusion of freedom is physical necessity; the exclusion of passivity is moral necessity. Thus the two impulsions subdue the mind: the former to the laws of nature, the latter to the laws of reason. It results from this that the instinct of play, which unites the double action of the two other instincts, will content the mind at once morally and physically. Hence, as it suppresses all that is contingent, it will also suppress all coercion, and will set man free physically and morally (XIV: 5).

However, Schiller is at pains to point out that this play is not the material play of sensuousness. Although he acknowledges play's autotelicity, in his rationalization of both *as if* and *mimesis* play it is still reason that dominates, with a view to an end goal of a better society.

We move now onto a group of philosophers who challenge this rationalization of play and return to earlier pre-rational ideas in order to give meaning to this paradoxical phenomenon,

and we start with Nietzsche, who reacted against the high reason of the philosophers who came before to celebrate ‘disharmony, instability and un-reason’ Henricks (2001: 54).

### **Nietzsche**

Both Spariosu (1989) and Henricks (2001) place the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) at the starting point for an examination of postmodern approaches to play scholarship, although he was too much of a Romantic to be considered a postmodernist himself. In looking for an epistemology that predated the rationality and governmentality of thought emerging from the modern era, Nietzsche found inspiration in pre-Socratic, pre-rational philosophers such as Heraclitus (Spariosu, 1989). In an unpredictable world, what mattered was not controlling the forces but co-existing with them; belief mattered less than will, and what mattered most was the will to power (Henricks, 2001). Modernist logic, science and progress are built on Apollonian ideals of harmony and beauty, whereas Nietzsche’s chaotic and unpredictable world is that of Dionysus, the god of frenzy, intoxication and ultimately rhapsodic oneness with others and the world. Rather than a fixed state of Being, ‘reality ... (as this play of forces) must be understood as a continual process of becoming ... people themselves must play boldly with no assurances for what they do’ (Henricks, 2001: 55).

### **Heidegger**

Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) was a German phenomenological philosopher who, like Nietzsche, saw the limits of rationality as a basis for understanding the world. His interest lay in the nature of being-in-the-world: the search for an authentic connection with rather than power over the paradoxical and elusive play of forces in a world that evades rational analysis (Henricks, 2001). Heidegger’s famous ontological distinction is that between what he called ‘ontical’ (concrete, substantial and fixed facts about the properties of entities) and ‘ontological’ (the meaning of being, the ways in which beings emerge from concealment).

Western metaphysics has historically sought to fix the properties of things as a basis for controlling them for utilitarian ends (what we might now call technology); Heidegger sees this as a violence to the original Greek *techne*, understood more as a form of craftsmanship that let beings emerge on their own terms. Authenticity lies in the open acceptance of our own demise as a way of moving beyond the urge to control and to be certain, allowing more emergent cultural and historical possibilities (Aho, 2007). Heidegger's concept of play within this philosophical framework changes over the course of his writing. He values poetry, not as mimetic representations of the world but as *poiesis*, as “founding” ... in the triple sense of grounding, bestowing and beginning’ (Spariosu. 1989: 107) and as the playground of the counterplay of world and earth, between self-revelation and self-concealment of being-in-the-world. Aho (2007) suggests that play, in the later writings of Heidegger, holds a twofold meaning: as a spontaneous form of leisure that frees people from the stresses of busy-ness, as ‘a disposition that “lets things be”’ (Avo, 2007: 232) and an event that allows an opening up of the possibilities, fragility and unpredictability of the world and of being-in-the-world. For Heidegger, as for Nietzsche, play is ‘a first principle which remains groundless while it grounds their thought’ (Spariosu, 1989: 125); however, they do not explore with any level of criticality the concept of play itself. This falls to German philosopher Eugen Fink (1905-1975), a student and colleague of Heidegger’s.

### **Fink**

For this section, we draw mostly on Fink’s *Spiel als Weltsymbol*, (Play as a Symbol of the World), first published in 1960, in which he considers the concept of play in myth, ritual and philosophy and its relation to the world. He suggests that play should not be reduced to *mimesis*, or imitation of the world, rather it is a symbol of it; nor should it be devalued to technique, as in the instrumental uses of it in *pedagogy* (Elden, 2008). In his essay *Oasis of Happiness: Thoughts toward an ontology of play*, from *Spiel als Weltsymbol*, Fink lays out

his understanding of play across three aspects: play's characteristics, an analysis of the structure of play, and the connection between play and being. Although play is a pervasive element of everyday life, it tends to be set apart from the seriousness of life, relegated to rest or relaxation. Even when seen to have a therapeutic value, this is still in terms of relief from the stresses of work and seriousness. Yet this is inadequate.

Play is not a marginal manifestation in the landscape of human life, nor a contingent phenomenon only surfacing at times. Play essentially belongs to the ontological constitution of human existence; it is an existential, fundamental phenomenon (Fink, 2012: 6).

That said, it is not a separate phenomenon from the rest of life but is interwoven with all the others: 'death, work, mastery, love and play form the elementary structure of tension and the outline of the puzzling and polysemous character of human existence' (p7). Play is a spontaneous activity that does not have a goal, unlike other aspects of human life, which are all directed to the ultimate goal of *eudaimonia*. Striving for *eudaimonia* is itself stressful, since we feel the urge to attain it whilst not knowing exactly what it is. This makes us future-focused, always searching for meaning and the good life. Play is not like this, it alone is not a part of this future focus.

It resembles an "oasis" of happiness arrived at in the desert of the striving for happiness ... the *immanent* purpose of play is not, as with the purposes of the rest of human activities, projected out towards the highest ultimate purpose' (p9).

Fink acknowledges the paradox of the pleasures of play, which he says are both sensual and intellectual, since it can encompass emotions that are not normally associated with pleasure: sorrow, fear, horror. We feel these emotions, and yet we know that it is play. Playing generally is interplay, it is a social event. Even in solitary play, others are in the imagination. Play is established and maintained through a bond – it is not limitlessly free but held together by accepted rules that, unlike immutable laws, are flexible and open to change. Play involves 'playthings' – artefacts that may be specifically produced or just found. Toys may be mass-

produced commodities, aggregates of their constitutive materials, but when imbued with meaning they become something else. Finally, there is the nature of the players themselves. In play they take on a different role that conceals their role outside of play, yet this is not entirely separate from their other being. This double aspect is the essence of playing, and together with all the other elements described, it forms the play-world. Although the play-world exists in actual space and time it also creates its own space and time; play is ambiguous. It is at the same time an inner subjective fantasy and yet it also makes use of objective ontic elements. Players can create their own worlds of which they are master. Fink recognizes the dialectical possibilities inherent in this: 'Play can contain within itself the bright Apollonian aspect of free selfhood, but also the dark Dionysian aspect of panic-stricken self-abandonment' (p17).

What is play's relation to the world? It is an expression of the imaginary, it is an appearance. It is ambiguous in that the appearance is both fantasy and actual. This ontic element of play is not apart from it but occurs within the play-world. For Fink, this 'leads back to the cardinal questions of philosophy, to the speculation concerning being and nothing and appearance and becoming' (p21). In addressing this question, Fink follows previous philosophers (he cites Heraclitus and Nietzsche) by asserting that play is 'an allegorical spectacle of the whole, an illuminating, speculative metaphor for the world' (p22). If this is the case, play is far from being trivial relaxation from the more serious business of work.

### **The French poststructuralists**

The postmodern pathway we have followed so far has been limited to the German philosophers who focused on the limits of rationality and the quest for universal truths. Another set of ideas, introduced only very briefly here, come from the loose assemblage of French poststructuralist philosophers such as Foucault (1926-1984), Lyotard (1924-1998), Derrida (1930-2004) and Deleuze (1925-1995), who looked more at the ways we are

governed (or, more accurately, we self-govern) through particular framings of knowledge, language and power. Although each of these philosophers approached these concepts in their own way, Henricks (2001) suggests that what links them is their return to idea of play not as something we do in or to the world as a way to know it or control it or even escape from it, but as a playful acceptance of and openness to the multiple possibilities that may emerge from the play of the world itself.

## **Wall**

We end this collection of postmodern philosophical understandings of play with the acknowledgement that whilst philosophers discuss grand notions such as the meaning of life, the world, being and humanity, mostly, as we pointed out in the section on epistemology, those writing have been white, male, educated and privileged and will all, to varying extents, be giving versions of their own worldviews. This means that, for example, there has been no discrete discussion of the place of women in all of this, nor of cultures other than minority world, ‘western’ ones. Perhaps more tellingly, very little has been said about children’s play. Given that play is a defining feature of childhood, and that children make up one third of humanity, this is a grave omission. For the most part, the philosophers included in this chapter either say nothing about children, or hold a view of their play that places it either in the realm of ‘mere child’s play’ or that imbues it with their own ideals about the nature and value of childhood itself, mostly as a period of preparation for adulthood. To rectify this, and as a bridge into our final discussion on ethics and play, we now turn to contemporary philosopher John Wall.

In his ontological examination of play in the light of children’s experience of playing, Wall (2013) shows how traditionally, adults have imposed their own meanings onto children’s play and argues for an alternative perspective that values children’s own experiences of playing. Wall identifies three main ontologies of children’s play that have persisted throughout



western philosophy. The first is the ‘top-down’ approach that sees children’s play as something unruly that needs to be controlled by adults and directed towards learning the things they need to know in order to take their place in the adult world. Key philosophers in this ontology of play include Plato and Kant. Second is the ‘bottom-up’ approach that sees ‘play as the expression of humanity’s basic goodness and wisdom, its natural or sacred spontaneity and simplicity’ (Wall, 2013: 35). If metaphors used for the ‘top-down’ approach are animalistic, for the ‘bottom-up’ they are of gardens and plants. A key philosopher in this school of thought is Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778), a proponent of the Romanticist movement that emerged in response to the Industrial Revolution and the worst excesses of the Enlightenment. Wall (2013: 36) gives a list of later nineteenth and twentieth century philosophers who also held these views: Friedrich Fröbel (1891), Karl Groos (1901), Luther Gulick (1920), Johan Huizinga (1955) and Roger Caillois (2001). The third approach is developmental, that play is a tool to be used for the development of individuals and societies. Key proponents here are Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas, and John Locke (1693), who famously described children as ‘white paper or wax, to be moulded and fashioned as one pleases’ (Wall, 2013: 261).

Wall proposes that a more ethical approach to understanding children’s play would be to use an approach he terms ‘childism’. Drawing parallels with feminism, he suggests that

The goal here would be a political one: not only to understand children’s agency and to welcome children’s voices and participation but, in addition, and more radically, to deconstruct the ways in which agency and participation across societies assume a basis in experiences of adulthood, and then to reconstruct their global meanings in response to the particular experiences of children (Wall, 2013: 33-34).

In this endeavor, Wall draws on postmodern phenomenology to reject the classic Cartesian dualisms of inner reason and outer nature, mind and body, subjectivity and objectivity, to offer a more interdependent relationship between individuals and their environments: a

being-in-the-world-at-play. If play is seen as the play of the world, this should also include the play of the world of children. Elsewhere, Wall (2010) draws on and adapts the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas (1961; 1969) to suggest that as adults we should accept the Otherness of children and resist trying to turn them into something known in our own world. This implies an ethical dimension to the philosophy of play and we turn now to the final section of the chapter to consider this.

### **Ethics of play**

The ethics of play necessarily considers the relation between play and how one should live one's life. As we have already seen, this poses (at least) two conceptual problems. The first is the paradoxical relationship between playing and reality. We have already seen that the philosophers who rationalize play also make a distinction between good and bad play, with the higher contemplative play of ideas dominating over baser corporeal or disruptive forms of play. The second is that if it is accepted that play is autotelic, then it should follow there is no *telos*, no end, other than the play itself.

Sylvester (1987), however, makes the case for the study of the ethics of play (and leisure and recreation as discrete entities) by linking the freedom of moral choice and the freedom of play through the choices made in expressing values, means and ends. If the ultimate end is the good life, how might this be defined and how might it relate to play? In his study of 80 sources from 1900-1983 he analysed the writers' identification of ultimate ends into nine categories, presented here in the order of highest frequency (other than the assorted singular category):

- (1) divine ends (including God, Christ, divine contemplation, and general spiritual themes);
- (2) happiness; (3) the combination of work, play, love, and worship; (4) play as the end of life; (5) self-actualization; (6) fulfillment; (7) Utopia; (8) no final end; and (9) assorted final ends.

We can infer from this list and from the ensuing discussion, that here too, writers assume a difference between good and bad play. Sylvester comments that the authors of the papers

reviewed all held strong normative beliefs about the value of play, leisure and recreation, and the same is true of the philosophers whose ideas have been presented in this chapter.

The issue of good and bad play might, for example, be addressed through an application of Aristotelian ethics, specifically through his ideas of the ‘golden mean’ and the concept of *eutrapelia*. Aristotle’s ethics are founded on the notion that in order to live the good life, to achieve the highest good of *eudaimonia*, we need to develop virtuous habits which will then lead us to take the right action in each situation. Every virtue has a golden mean between excess and deficiency. *Eutrapelia* is the virtue of wit (literally meaning ‘happy turning’) and sits above the midpoint of (in an elevated position, rather than being merely in between) boorishness (*agroikos*) – taking things too seriously – and frivolity (*bomolochos*) (Ardley, 1967). This golden mean can be applied to play itself. This leads us to a consideration less of play’s ends and means, but more of the concept of playing well. For this we return to the work of Gadamer and Vilhauer’s (2010, 2013) discussion of the ethical dimensions of dialogue as the play of understanding.

As we have seen, play, for Gadamer, is not a subjective experience but something that has an existence of its own and that arises, in the to-and-fro movements between players. These movements are different from each other and not mechanical or pre-determined. Players submit to the rules of the game: the freedom of play arises from the profound commitment to the constraint of the rules of play. Although the players submit to the primacy of play’s separateness – the game plays the players – they are actively involved as the play relies on their to-and-fro movements. Those who do not take the games seriously are spoilsports.

Vilhauer (2013) shows how Gadamer applies this understanding of play to understanding itself, and to dialogue. Focusing on the commitment to the to-and-from movement of the play of understanding requires an openness to the Other, a willingness to go beyond our own subjective experiences and desire for control and adjust our movements in order to keep the

game going. Gadamer talks of this openness in terms of I/Thou relations, saying that we need to allow the Thou to be Thou. In her discussion of dialogue as the play of understanding, Vilhauer (2013) identified three forms of foul play in I/Thou relations. The scientific approach to the Other treats the Other as a thing to be studied and known and ultimately therefore controlled; the psychological approach to the Other pays attention to the Other but interprets their movements as subjective and/or idiosyncratic, thereby not being open to their difference as legitimate; and the sophistic approach is one that treats the play as agonistic and plays to win, this being yet another form of control over the Other. Ethics consists in avoiding these forms of foul play and control, and remaining open to the Other as different. We suggest that such an ethics can come full (hermeneutical) circle and also be an ethics of play *per se*. Openness to the Other and a commitment to the different to-and-fro movements as an ethical approach to play and playing helps to resolve to some extent (through an acceptance of the inherent paradox) the tensions between play's autotelicity and value, and between good and bad play.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter has offered a brief glimpse into philosophy as an activity and into the philosophy of play. It has highlighted the contested nature of knowledge, seeing it as situated and partial, and that goes too, for our knowledge about, and definitions of, play. What philosophers have had to say about play can be set alongside the paradigms and world-views of particular eras and places, and is a reflection of their desire for how play should be rather than, perhaps, how it is in everyday life. In particular, the classic Greek scholars and the Enlightenment philosophers sought to rationalize play as a means to higher ends where reason, citizenship and the play of the mind dominate over the senses, bodily pleasures, carnival and play as everyday - play as world-becoming, as resistance, as a space where rules

are made, altered and remade, and as a place where we can once again see play through the eyes of a child.

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