

PLAY AND SPORT

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I

The general intent of this paper is to philosophically confront the phenomenon of active participation in sport, in particular in the playing of competitive games, with the purpose of uncovering the major existential characteristics that are there present. By articulating what normally occurs un-self-consciously in sport it is hoped that the various mesh of qualities that are involved will be revealed to contain some fundamentally human concerns. The attempt is also made to undercut such traditional assumptions as 1) the "play-world" exists as a world of illusion and 2) that such dichotomies as play/work and play/seriousness are valid. This effort will include the attempt to show that play is not a specific list of activities, but rather is a stance to be taken toward activity. To dispel any early confusion I will here be using the term 'game' in much the same sense as does Schmitz in his article "Play and Sport: Suspension of the Ordinary;" (2) that is, as a particular instance of formalized play that can be distinguished from the other formal manifestation of play, namely "sporting skills." 'Sport' then is the more general category of which games are a distinctive specimen. It is hoped that the notion of 'play', by far the most prominent theme to be considered here, will emerge as a distinctive entity in itself.

II

Eugen Fink, in his excellent article "The Ontology of Play," suggests that in writing about play attention should be focused on developing a stylistic counterpart to the subject of the writing:

We would surely prefer something of the very atmosphere of play with a lightness of touch in treating the subject, stressing its creative fullness, its overflowing richness and its inexhaustible attraction. (2: p.76)

The composition and presentation of the philosophic work should itself be playful. What is called into question by this remark is not a mere matter of choosing which stylistic devices are most effective in treating the subject of play. Rather a more fundamental issue is raised. How does one philosophize and write about play and not violate the nature of that which one is attempting to discuss? At this point it is far easier to indicate what should not be done. Play cannot be treated as a piece of empirical data to be analyzed. An "objective" definition, be it scientific or linguistic, of play cannot be produced. Why? Because play is a quality of activity; it is a vibrant experience that each one of us has had at some time

or another. To deal with it as an objective thing is to contradict what it is, and thus destroy it. Therefore, the source material for this paper comes, not from any corpus of knowledge, nor from a series of experiments run on athletes. Rather, it comes from my experience of play. Needless to say there has been much written on play. Much of it is instructive and provocative, but ultimately little of it fully addresses itself to, and can account for the experience of play. Too often in these readings one does not feel oneself to be on familiar, playful, ground. I cannot help but wonder why this is the case. This is the real issue raised by Fink's remarks: why is it so difficult to philosophically articulate this human activity and at the same time capture the spirit of play itself?

A singular thought which has appeared throughout the history of philosophy strikes me here. Succinctly, one might say this thought is an attempt to interpret human being as essentially developmental or "movemental." Plato in The Symposium expressed this as follows:

Although we speak of an individual as being the same so long as he continues to exist in the same form, and therefore assume that a man is the same person in his old age as in his infancy, yet for all we call him the same every bit of him is different and every day he is becoming a new man. (5: 207D)

Human being entails movement; growth, decay, transformation. G.W.F. Hegel gave a more explicit version of this by describing human reality as dialectical, as in a process of negation and ongoing change. I would venture to say this thought has appeared in Heraclitus and Nietzsche as well. The fundamental corollary to this idea is that any philosophy which attempts to understand human being must itself contain and be in harmony with that essential movement, and not impose upon it an artificial and abstract fixity. Once again this finds implicit expression in Plato and more explicit expression in Hegel. The latter insisted in the Preface to his work The Phenomenology of Mind that that kind of knowledge which is static and fixed, prime examples being mathematical-quantifiable knowledge and blind ideology, could never be a truly philosophical understanding of human being. (3)

Perhaps this brief discussion can shed some light on the earlier question; why is it that even the most insightful articles and books have failed to do full justice to the experience of play? Play is a brilliant and fundamental capturing of what I am calling human movement. If we are to praise play and remain consistent, then our praise itself should be playful. Assuming that our praise is to take the form of speech, and in my case it does, then perhaps a reason for the difficulties that occur is found in the very act of speaking itself. Language, by its nature, tends towards abstraction. Words alone stand as somewhat fixed and stable in a world of flux and change; the word 'play' for example. One word describes a multitude of experiences, each unique in its own way. All of us bring a lifetime of activity in fulfilling for ourselves the meaning of the word 'play.' Yet we all use the same one word. This is, needless to say, the greatest transcendent quality of language. It enables us to go beyond the personal and subjective and discuss a world that is common and shared. Yet it is also its greatest danger. In writing about play we run a great risk of abstraction. Such a risk is not as present, for example, in a scientific analysis of the bone struc-

ture of the human body. There the language can more easily be made to conform with the subject matter. But in philosophically praising play there is the tendency towards and danger of betrayal of our subject. As we put into words our thoughts about play, we run the risk of the cessation of the very movement we are seeking to praise. How, then, is one to be playful in a work such as this? Will the task of reflection, of some kind of analysis, immediately contradict play itself?

Henry Bugbee, in a marvelous book entitled The Inward Morning, gives what I think is some excellent and revealing advice in regard to writing philosophically:

Get it down. Get it down so far as possible the minute inflections of day to day thought. Get down the key ideas as they occur. Don't worry about what it will add up to. Don't worry whether it will come to something finished. Don't give up when faced with the evidence of miscarried thought. Write on, not over again. Let it flow. (1: p.44)

In some sense this spirit, or at least a more formalized capturing of this spirit, is what is aimed for in this paper. When the skier has finally reached the top of the mountain and stands surveying the scene before him he cannot possibly chart out the explicit moves that are to come. To have such knowledge would destroy the spontaneity and the natural flow of skiing. The effort for the athlete is to let it flow, to enter into the run downhill or the game with a stance of openness and the desire to play as best he can. Is it possible to begin this paper in that same fashion? Here I would hope to play with play. There are no guarantees about play. Sport, in which we are commonly said to be playing, does not insure that the participants are actually playing. Play is a deeply rooted possibility for man. Sport is an area where play can very likely surface, but it need not and often does not. Philosophy also could be a place where men and women play. Bugbee shows us how to make our reflections playful. But just as sport does not provide a guarantee of playfulness, philosophy does so even less.

There is an experience which I clearly share with literally millions of people and which the sociologists have forcefully documented. This is my frequently and eagerly making the willful, indeed the happy, decision to enter into the world of sport in order to play. The experience can often entail a leaving of a situation that is somehow less vital, less fulfilling and substantial, than that of the "play-world." Once there, in the midst of play, I feel more at home. I become absorbed in a game and feel an awakening and a restoration of life.

Why is this? Why do these hours of play stand out in vivid contrast to the rest of the, too often, dreary day? Many would give very definite causal explanations. My accumulated tensions are allowed to come out and thus be alleviated. My repressed aggressions are expelled, or my psychological conflicts are expressed. Perhaps one would say that my serious life problems have been escaped from, and I have gained my refreshment from the unreal absorption in a game. I do not doubt that these kinds of reasons hold some force in explaining my attraction to play. However, there is an underlying limitation to these accounts and that is that they place the real value and essence of play somewhere other than play. Isn't this the common interpretation of play? It is for recreation, for weekends and vacations--one

plays to recreate one's spirit, and the most positive consequence is to return to the "real" world and once again be able to cope and function. Play becomes therapy and a secondary activity which, however enjoyable, serves the more significant aspects of life. Eugen Fink is correct when he calls this outlook:

...a vulgar interpretation; that play is nothing more than a phenomenon on the margin of human life, a peripheral fact, an occasional sort of thing. (2: p.77)

I realize that I am refreshed by my hours of playing, and that they do help me to deal with the rest of my day. But I will not subscribe to a conception of play as primarily therapy, as peripheral--I do not play in order that I may work. I sense that the reason I have experienced what I have in sport, and so many millions come to sport with the devotion they do, is more fundamental than the ones usually given. Could it be that I feel more at home on the basketball court because, in a very real sense, I truly am at home? The connotations that the modern world puts on play are all too familiar; it is a frivolous throwback to childhood, it is careless and anti-theoretical to seriousness. At best it serves to pleasantly occupy man in need of a break from the meaningful, and therefore unpleasant, tasks of life. I sense a much deeper affinity between play and man. Could it be that what goes on on the basketball court is a reminder of the way things ought to be and too often are not? Using the Aristotelian sense of the word natural, that is as a fulfillment of human nature, am I most natural in my play?

Play is a mode of being. It is a way of comporting oneself, a way of approaching and extending oneself to the world. It is a phenomenon that frequently arises in various human activities. But when taken self-consciously, when chosen as the best way to be, play can become more than a sporadic phenomenon; it can become a stance.

A stance is very much like an attitude. An attitude is a way of thinking about things; it is a mental disposition and an orientation towards the world. Kurt Riezler, in "Play and Seriousness" for example, often talks about the "playful attitude." (2) But a stance is more deeply rooted than an attitude; it permeates all aspects of human being. The word is often used to describe a purely physical position--the offensive stance of a football player. He deliberately takes this stance because it is the best way to play football. A stance goes beyond the intellect to the body and the spirit, and becomes a mode of being-toward-the-world.

Play is fluid. Bugbee's advice, "let it flow," is most appropriate, for play is concretized fluidity. It is movement; continual, unharassed going. It refuses to stagnate, to get sour and die. The basketball player who bemoans a missed lay-up instead of hurrying back on defense, the skier who wallows in the snow of previous falls instead of skiing on down the mountain, have lost the fluidity that is possible and are no longer playing as best they can. On one level fluidity is an aesthetic quality of play. It is the rhythmic smoothness and the grace we often observe.

In many of the recent writings on play reference has often been made to a "play world," a distinct and unique realm with its peculiar temporality and spatiality. Once in this realm the non-play (some call it the real, the ordinary, the serious or the natural) world is said to pale and then dissolve into non-existence. Johan Huizinga best expresses this with his term "secludedness." (4: p.25) Kenneth Schmitz, in a very insightful article "Sport

and Play: Suspension of the Ordinary," claims that the "natural world" is left behind in the decision to play and an entirely new order is created and entered into. (2: p.25) Fink tells us that "...human play is creation through the medium of pleasure of a world of imaginary activity." (2: p.83)

The observations which these men have made are compelling. When we play the rest of the world does seem to be suspended and left behind. We are not concerned or aware of other matters or other places. It is true that making a basket has no other meaning in life other than that which the game of basketball grants it. There is a kind of secludedness in play, which involves limited, arbitrary, and all-absorbing temporal and spatial dimensions. But the reason for this is not, as is often asserted, that we have created an illusion without imagination. Far from it. I think that here lies the basic error that exists in this current of thought; the confusion of the emergence of a play world with an illusion. Play is the very opposite of illusion, for it is a deepening of the experience of the world which is at hand at the present moment. What is missing from the aforementioned analysis is the possibility of play becoming a stance for life, for all aspects of life. If play is grounded upon illusion and the suspension of the natural world, then it is precluded from becoming a mode of being toward that world. At best it could be a thing that happens once in a while and might even be magnificent and beneficial, but it could never be a stance to be cultivated and pursued. Play is a mode of encountering the world, not a pleasurable route away from it. Again, in observing play we readily notice this unusual quality of secludedness. For the tennis player the world has become narrowed to the rectangular lines of the tennis court, the net, the ball, the opponent, and in this sense the rest of the world is left behind. But this is a consequence of his immersion in the activity. A full involvement in any situation will give rise to a unique world of distinctive temporality and spatiality.

Isn't this the difference between those experiences from which we happily depart towards sport, and play? What could be less secluded than depression or anxiety--the trappings of the everyday? They are characterized by fragmentation, they skip around, lamenting the past, projecting into the future, and let the present slip by unnoticed. They are located nowhere in particular. Any activity that is not grounded in the present is a cessation of authentic experience. Play is full commitment of body and spirit to the activity; it is immersion in the world that is here and now, and it is only this kind of immersion that does full justice to the powers of man to encounter the world. The conception of play as illusory is, in effect, a conception of it as ingenuine experience.

A second step that is frequently taken in an analysis of play is to call it an activity, perhaps the only activity, that has meaning within itself. It is self-contained and self-sufficient. Again, this comes out strongly in Fink. In the Heideggerian tradition he describes the human condition as characterized by a strange kind of "futurism." All life seems oriented towards goals and future projects. Man searches for an understanding of himself; unlike other animals he cannot remain content with the mere living out of his life, but must seek that which will give his existence meaning. Play stands in graphic contrast to this, the serious side of life, and thus "...appears as a serene presence, with a meaning sufficient to itself." (2: p.81) Play, as an activity that has no reward or value other than itself, is only for the sake of play. It has no telos, and it is, therefore, supposedly unconcerned

with the future. I am contending that play is a stance to be taken and that it is characterized by immersion. It does not follow from this that we should be utterly oblivious to the future. Play does not preclude having a telos, as Fink claims it does. All play is aware of and thus directed toward the future. But the critical dimension of play's orientation to the future is that it is harmonious with other temporal dimensions. When we are immersed in our play we do not allow the future to exist as a disjointed goal to which the present stands in discord (as is frequently the case with worry or anxiety). Nor is the past in isolation and tension with the present (as it is with guilt). Rather, play provides for a unity of past, present, and future, and it is out of this unity that the fluidity and harmony of genuine human experience emerges.

Sport shows this very well. A game has an end. In the midst of the game the player is aware of the end that is to come. Yet this does not in any way detract from his full commitment to the present, so much as make that commitment genuinely purposeful. Rather, the fact that the game ends (with only one player or team the victor) heightens the urgency and the intensity of the activity. When the future does detract, when the player's attention is given somewhere other than the moment (to the scoreboard or to tomorrow's sport page for example) his fluidity is lost and his playing will suffer. He must be immersed in his play, yet there is an implicit and steadfast awareness that the game is played only for a limited amount of time and will end. A good player is always open to the best possibilities that the future holds. If a teammate is cutting towards the basket in basketball, or the goal in soccer, he will pass him the ball. Let us reflect for a moment on this basic existential possibility, the lead pass. It certainly is true in some sense that in an intensely played game we experience the here and now, the present. But if the experienced basketball player, one who is fully immersed in the game, sees a person cutting to the basket he will pass him the ball, not to where the man is, but to where the man will be. He leads the man toward the basket with his pass. He is in the present but toward the future. And, needless to say, he is with his past; the many practice sessions and previous games have brought him to this moment where he can effectively make the lead pass. This shows something very peculiar about the structure of human time; it simply does not exist as separate and distinct entities, past, present, future. Human time can certainly be regarded as fragmented, and in fact usually is. But the possibility for a unity is always there, and when man is playing fully that possibility is actualized, and harmony is restored. The present contains the future and is with the past. Immersion that is continued to the future breeds fluidity. The lead pass captures and holds together this unity in one graceful and flowing motion.

Play is a directed stance, for it is always a playing-with. I play with my toys, with you, with myself. There is a basic outwardness in play. For this reason, implicit in the immersion that characterizes play is openness. In playing we are able to relate to the world, to welcome it into our beings. In other experiences, such as war or alienation, there is a closedness and a mistrust. But in play there is, in some sense, a oneness with the world. However, play qualifies this oneness, for play is always human action. The skier must have a deeply rooted openness to the contours of the mountain, but he radically qualifies this openness with responsiveness. Drew Hyland in his article "Athletic Angst" best describes this by using the example of playing in a game. "My being was in terms of my being part of the

game,..."--here is shown the openness that is a kind of oneness--"...and the game took on its being in part through my participation..."(2: p.91)--here is shown the commitment to human action that is responsiveness. In a forthcoming work Hyland describes this as "Responsive-Openness."

Firstly let us look at the alternatives to this "responsive-openness." I think there are two and they take the form of an isolation of each extreme--pure openness and pure responsiveness.

If we are open and only open, eventually we will cease to be anything but a hollow cavity for the wind to blow through. (See, for example, Herrigel's Zen and the Art of Archery.) Pure openness without a response becomes ineffectuality and a denial of the power of the individual self. If a player sees himself only in terms of the game, if he drifts with the flow of the game and refuses to take part in shaping the course of the game, he has ceased to respond. Again using terminology belonging to Hyland, he has "submitted" without protest to the stream of the game. If, in a far more likely possibility, the player sees the game solely as a result of his own personal response, and by doing so refuses to acknowledge the need or desirability of that which is other than him, then the stance of "mastery" has been entered into. This is the "hot-shot," the arrogant, domineering player who attempts to win a game on his own. Mastery, the preponderance of response, results in alienation, for it is a failure to be open to anyone or anything. It is only play, "Responsive-Openness," that preserves all of that which is best in man. It retains his openness, his wonder and love of the world, while guaranteeing he does not betray his potential for human response. Above all else it is this sense of in-betweenness that is essential to play. Play is activity that proceeds with an implicit awareness of the precariousness of the human situation, and the necessity of this in-betweenness. Think, once again, of the athlete. He is intensely involved. He is ready for anything that might happen. He is acutely attuned to his surroundings; his opponents, his teammates, the court. The athlete implicitly knows that he does not know what will happen in the game; he is constantly on the brink, prepared to respond to any development. He knows the game is not in his complete control. Yet he does, he must, attempt to exert some influence--he plays as best he can. The athlete tempers his playing, his action, with the knowledge that none of his actions is ever complete; every successful jump shot must be followed by defense. Every slam on the tennis court must be followed by readiness for the possibility of a return. The athlete who is playing well plays with an implicit knowledge of a kind of tension--the tension between the incompleteness of his action and the necessity for action. It is play, responsive-openness, that proceeds with an awareness of precariousness, that is most natural for man.

III

At this point I would like to conclude with a brief elaboration of the relationship between sport and play that has been so heavily drawn upon throughout this paper. Again, when I say 'sport' I mean competitive games in particular. The term 'game' itself seems to imply something less than significant. If one were to say "life is a game" we would usually take him to mean that life is frivolous and careless. What is a game? It is a mere two hour activity which takes place on some kind of court, and which is strictly defined by the rules. The argument has often been made that games

are arbitrary, artificial and limited to such a degree that they are vastly overshadowed by most other activities. I take this argument to be very much in keeping with the one which claims play is an illusion, and find it similarly refutable.

Games do exist in a tightly limited world, a world of bracketed time and space which imposes restraints upon human action (i.e., the rules). Games are rightly said to exist as different from the "outside world." The off-court world does not exist in such brackets and it often seems that there are no rules whatsoever outside of the game. But this does not make the game a foreign encroachment upon the real world and preclude it from meriting serious philosophical attention. It simply cites the existence and shows the nature of an extraordinary dimension--a dimension apart from the ordinary, largely unbracketed experience.

Awareness of the game's finitude is possible, indeed it is unavoidable, to a degree which awareness of life's limits are not. And this, then, is the reason for the importance of sport and games; in its clarity, with its peculiar but ontologically familiar restrictions imposed upon it, the game heightens and enlarges an already existing situation: Human finitude. But more than merely amplifying life, sport places a great stake upon it. Sport invites us to live within our limitations and play well. It places demands upon the athlete. This is not to claim that winning is the primary demand of sport, as fashionably thought, for if the sole demand were to win then the athlete would cease to play when he lost, for a demand is something that must be met. In war, not play, winning is absolutized, for losing is irredeemable. Sport demands playing-to-win, playing well. In life the crucial issue of living well is terribly elusive. But sport, having strictly limited itself via the rules, knows what it means to play well. In sport we are placed within a situation that forces us to confront out finitude, and it is up to us to respond.

What is created by the spatial and temporal limitations in games might be called a kind of internality. A ball swishing through a net or a foot on a boundary line have no meaning other than within the internalized game of basketball. As I mentioned before, to confuse internality with illusion is a mistake made by several thinkers. Huizinga (in a work that is admittedly more complex and problematic) demonstrates this by saying: "For the adult and responsible human being play is a function which he could equally well leave alone. Play is superfluous." (4: p.54)

The basketball court does become a world characterized by Huizingian "secludedness." But the importance of basketball is not the court itself; it is what the athlete does on the court. The world of games exists for man to express with his body, and live out with his entire being, his playfulness. The game's rules, its internality, does not detract from the significance of sport. Rather, it is the necessary precondition for providing the full opportunity to play well.

IV

The major thrust of this paper has been to uncover those qualities that constitute play as they are present in sport. The suggestion has been made that this stance of play represents something far greater than games or sport itself. In a simplistic way, one might describe these qualities of play as a general symptom of well being. For example, other avenues of thought in

which the notion of play could be successfully applied are 1) philosophical dialogue as a mode of play and 2) the reformulation of the modern stance of mastery of nature to one of play. Play is a fundamental human possibility, and it can become a life stance. The effort is to cultivate and widen the scope of our playfulness; to seek out play wherever it may surface and to learn from it, to reflect upon it. And where do we look? The body provides the most ready area for our playfulness to emerge; the body wants and can do those very things I have been speaking about. The body is our receptor of the world, the brink of our involvement with the world. Play, as a stance, is a mode of being-toward that very same world. The kind of immersion, the priority of total experience and responsive-openness become most accessible with our bodies. For this reason play and sport have long been associated. For sport, very simply, is a great place for men to play.

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