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**PLAY AS EXPRESSION: AN ANALYSIS BASED ON THE PHILOSOPHY OF  
MAURICE MERLEAU-PONTY**

A Thesis in  
Kinesiology  
by  
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## ABSTRACT

Play has been an object of reflection since classical antiquity. However, it was not until the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that play received a genuine and systematic treatment in academic circles. Most of the theories that emerged during this period were strongly influenced by the success of empirical methods of investigation. Play, then, was not primarily understood as a subjective and meaningful way of relating, experiencing, or unfolding in the world but as an objective process capable of being isolated, measured, and manipulated. Around the 1930s this understanding of play was seen as too restrictive and reductionistic, and a movement attempting to explore and understand play's intrinsic strength to seduce, captivate, and absorb people emerged. Unfortunately, most of these projects sought a definitive play logos, distanced player from playgrounds, and failed to realize their interrelationship.

This dissertation attempts to return to the originality of the lived experience of play. Rather than focusing on players and playgrounds as two objective structures, the goal of this project is to explore and describe the dynamic style of being manifested at play in its immediate lived embodiment and expression. Such an account uncovers the different layers of the intricate and fluid interplay between players and playgrounds which is constitutive and definitive of play. I explore the experience of play using the philosophic insights of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, for it honors and respects people's irreducible dialogue with the world and that which is expressed in it. Play is seen, then, as a special mode of disclosing

peoples' projects toward the world. In this dissertation I distinguish qualitatively different modes of play, reevaluate their role and significance for society and education, and suggest practical applications to promote educational environments in which play is more likely to appear.

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Like the first men to cast off their monkey skins, or like the great philosophers, he is dominated by the basic problems of mankind. He lives them as if they were immediate and urgent necessities. Like the child, he sees everything for the first time. He is forever astonished and wonders why and wherefore. Everything seems miraculous to him, and each morning when he opens his eyes he sees trees, sea, stones and birds, and he is amazed.

Nikos Kazantzakis, *Zorba The Greek*

I saw the Aleph from all points; I saw the earth in the Aleph and in the earth the Aleph once more and the earth in the Aleph; I saw my face and my viscera; I saw your face and felt vertigo and cried because my eyes had seen that conjectural and secret object whose name men usurp but which no man has gazed on: the inconceivable universe.

Jorge Luis Borges, *The Aleph*

## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

People have been persuaded, struck, and even mesmerized by the seductive call of play throughout history and in the most diverse cultures. The experience of play has induced surrender and rapture and, partly as a result, has raised questions about this phenomenon. Reflection about play has captured the imagination of people since ancient times. A variety of thinkers ranging from Plato to Friedrich Schiller and from Aristotle to Jean-Jacques Rousseau have made reference to the significance and power of play. However, most of these reflections were more isolated and unsystematic commentaries than exhaustive and dedicated studies. Historically, attempts to understand play have proceeded sporadically and, in general, have not been fashionable. Indeed, play has often been considered a relatively trivial topic of only passing interest in academic circles. It was not until the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that play received a more serious and expanded treatment.

Multiple theories of play were advanced at the turn of the twentieth century and the following few decades to explain the roots of and motivation to play. Explanations ranged from the notion of play as the product of an energy surplus after the needs of survival had been satisfied to hypotheses claiming that play is a cathartic expression of disorganized emotions or a force behind cognitive and

social development. These theories were strongly influenced by the overwhelming success of science and its emphasis on empirical methods of investigation. In this context, play was not primarily understood as a subjective and meaningful way of relating, experiencing, or unfolding in the world but as an objective process capable of being isolated, measured, and manipulated. Play was subsumed under the study of objective reality and, therefore, reduced to and treated as any other object in the world.

Despite the twentieth-century enthusiasm for play and the fact that many theories recognized this phenomenon and its consequences as relevant for human growth and development, none of these theories came close to exploring and identifying the fundamental relevance play has for human beings.

Theoretical explanations of play based on scientific methods of study were criticized as being restrictive perspectives, having only biological and psychological import. For some commentators (Osterhoudt, 1991) these theoretical frameworks “fail to grasp the essential character of the play phenomenon because they content themselves with accounts of play’s bio-psychological manifestations, thus mistaking the manifestation for the essential root of appearance” (p. 33). Around the 1930s scholars from diverse disciplines started to recognize that play does not need to serve or respond to the biological and psychological necessities of life. For these scholars, these types of explanations were considered too limited in scope.

Huizinga (1955) was one of the first scholars to convincingly observe that play is not reducible to biological functions and that it is a complex and slippery phenomenon that resists reductionistic analyses. Many followed his attempt to withdraw from the exteriority of play in order to explore and understand its intrinsic strength to seduce, captivate, and absorb the player. As a result of the movement to reject simplistic analyses of play, two tendencies to approach this phenomenon emerged systematically. One focuses on identifying the essential set of characteristics and attributes of play while the other centers its attention in describing qualitative distinctions within play and their function and value for human life. These approaches proved useful and produced important insights in advancing a more comprehensive understanding of play but, for a variety of reasons, as I will argue, they were incomplete or otherwise insufficient.

This project starts, precisely, where the successes and shortcomings of the previous theories of play intersect. Rather than seeking a definitive and autonomous play *logos* or category swinging back and forth from consciousness to activity, from meaning to context, from interiority to exteriority—in short, from player to playground and vice versa—I approach play as a dynamic and radical relationship between a player and a playground. Instead of dichotomizing or distancing players from playgrounds, making them mutually exclusive pairs or poles, the genesis of play will be found in the articulating point in which players and playgrounds form indivisible and unique expressive wholes. The long acknowledged complexity and uniqueness of play is better understood, I argue,

when the phenomenon is not seen as the encounter of two objective structures but as a dynamic way of experiencing the world.

The intricate and fluid interplay between players and playgrounds, which is constitutive and definitive of play, resists the kind of reification and transparency made possible by appealing to abstract ways of dealing with phenomena. This project attempts to return to the *originality* of the lived experience of play while realizing that any degree of stability gained is always provisional and somewhat distortive. If people's openness, engagement, and commitment to the world are to be taken seriously, play has to be examined in the world in which it appears. In turn, if the world is not merely the sum of physical characteristics in front of people but a multitude of meanings transpiring in and through human potentialities, the play world has to be approached as these meanings present themselves. The existential and phenomenological philosophy of Maurice Merleau-Ponty provides a promising path to illuminate the lived experience of play, for it honors and respects people's irreducible dialogue with the world and that which is expressed in it.

My task will be, then, to penetrate the lived experience of play and explore what players are aware of while living this unique expressive mode of unfolding in the world. The philosophy of Merleau-Ponty will provide guidance and inspiration for this journey. My intent is also to distinguish between qualitatively superior and inferior modes of play in order to reevaluate the role that play occupies in society and education. I will finalize this project by suggesting

practical applications to promote good quality play environments in educational settings. Although the spirit of play cannot be mandated, it is possible for educators to create environments in which play is more likely to appear. The vision of play that will emerge from this project will reveal that this phenomenon is inherently educational.

This project is divided into five chapters. In chapter 2 I review the philosophical accounts of play whose aim is either to establish its basic defining features by distinguishing this phenomenon from other spheres of human activity or to find the internal qualities that give play its unique value. I offer, in chapter 3, a critical evaluation of the accounts of play reviewed in the previous chapter and reveal the need to appreciate fully the experiential tendencies of the immediate encounter of play. In this chapter I lay the foundation for the forthcoming analysis of play. In chapter 4 I discuss the main philosophical ideas of Merleau-Ponty and establish the reasons why his philosophy is especially helpful for penetrating the structure of play, its experiential value, and significance as an irreducible phenomenon of life. In chapter 5 I explore the lived experience of play based on the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty. It provides an account of its general and specific characteristics. In this chapter it will be established that play is lived as the embodiment of a unique kind of expressive intention. Finally, in chapter 6 I revisit the role of play in education and suggest guidelines for its promotion in schools.

## Chapter 2

### Review of literature

The purpose of this chapter is to review philosophical accounts of play in which the aim is either to outline its essential set of attributes and characteristics or explore qualitative distinctions within this realm of human life and their respective values. In order to better fulfill this purpose the chapter is divided into two sections. Each section addresses one of the aforementioned approaches to the phenomenon of play. The first section deals with what I call *definitional analyses of play*; the second, *normative analyses of play*.

#### 2.1 Definitional analyses of play

This section covers those analyses of play that attempt to understand this phenomenon by identifying its basic defining features. In doing so they distinguish play from other spheres of human activity. The focus of these definitional efforts is on identifying the necessary and sufficient conditions for the phenomenon of play. In short, they determine the nature of play. These approaches tend to present play as a discrete structure capable of being objectively analyzed and known. They work under the assumption that play is a durable reality that can be grasped and isolated even when some authors



recognized that play is complex and untidy. In an important sense, these analyses objectify the phenomenon of play.

In addition to the studies of play that determine its nature, this section also includes those analyses that draw connections between play and games. These approaches believe that the invitations coming from games offer unique avenues for, and in a sense secure, play. That is, for these theories engaging in a game means, more often than not, genuinely playing a game. Then, in exploring how games function as wellsprings for play, these definitional efforts not only identify the internal logic of games but classify them based on the type of play projects these activities are likely to generate.

### **2.1.1 The nature of play**

Johan Huizinga's classic treatise on play *Homo Ludens* and Eugen Fink's work "The Ontology of Play" disclose a direction, a way of thinking about play that focuses on its structure. Although Huizinga studied the history of the play concept and how it has been used in different cultures, he thought that play has an essence, a unique and distinguishable character that can be uncovered. Fink held the same view. The project of these two authors includes the determination and understanding of the essence of play. The narrative of Huizinga and Fink originates from the need to sustain the relevance of play in itself for human beings and not to divert into its extrinsic consequences.

The task of the beginning of *Homo Ludens* is to show that a vast number of studies of play have been infected with presuppositions. For example, this academic tradition assumes that play “must have some kind of biological purpose” (Huizinga, 1955, p. 2).<sup>1</sup> Huizinga, a Dutch historian who believed that play is not reducible to a “physiological phenomenon or a psychological reflex” (p. 1), critiqued what might be labeled reductionistic theories of play. These positions include the justification of play as a mechanism to dispense surplus energy after the needs of survival had been satisfied; as being a cathartic expression of disorganized emotions; as a force for cognitive development; and as a functional vehicle to prepare individuals for adult life. Huizinga deemed these explanations as simplistic, incapable of “coming much nearer to a real understanding of the play-concept” (p. 2). The presupposition that permeates and sustains these theories is that play “must serve something that is *not* play, that it must have some kind of biological purpose” (p. 2). To put it differently, Huizinga considered that cause-effect, reactive, or mechanical renditions of play—theories about play as a response to the necessities of life—are misguided. The nature of play cannot be found outside play itself. Huizinga thought that play transcends mere physical or biological activity. For him, at the core of play there is meaning, “a non-materialistic quality in the nature of the

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this chapter whenever I quote Huizinga, it is in reference to his book *Homo Ludens*. Therefore, hereafter, when quoting Huizinga I will only provide the specific page citation in the text.

thing itself” (p. 1). This quality is highly elusive. It resists and escapes reductionistic analyses.

Huizinga called this profound and primary category of life *fun* or *joy* (pp. 2-3, 28). The fun of playing is the primordial quality of play; there lies what captures and wraps up human beings. It is precisely the absorption, intensity, and power of maddening that play brings about that Huizinga wanted to explore and understand. This is the beginning of Huizinga’s project. It is a call to withdraw from the exterior of play; it is a pull to its essentials; it is an invitation to restore its original meaning and actualize a category of life that is utterly familiar to every human being. Huizinga proposed to concentrate on “what play is *in itself*, and what it means for the player” (p. 2). To accomplish that he “begin[s] where biology and psychology leave off” (p. 4).

Huizinga’s larger project in *Homo Ludens* is to analyze the role of play in the development of culture. He suggested that play and culture are intimately connected. More importantly, play not only antecedes, molds, and remolds culture permanently, it constitutes culture’s driving force. Huizinga stated the uniqueness of his project affirming that “the whole point is to show that genuine, pure play is one of the main bases of civilization” (p. 5).

To carry out his task, Huizinga engaged in a movement that opens up an inquiry into what he considers *genuine* or *pure* play and uncovers the limits of the theories of play that are not able to disclose its meaning. Huizinga’s inquiry departs from and leaves behind the search of mechanisms explaining play and

begins a definitional effort. Although for Huizinga play “is not susceptible of exact definition” (p. 7), he nevertheless believed that this phenomenon remains “distinct from all the other forms of thought in which we express the structure of mental and social life” (p. 7). Because of that Huizinga proposed “to confine [himself] to describing the main characteristics of play” (p. 7).

Huizinga’s first characteristic of play is that it is a voluntarily activity. For Huizinga play has to do with the notion of free choice and individual control. When a player decides to play, she is in a sense unconstrained by the restrictions of her oppressive reality. Play constitutes an avenue to escape and break down the contingencies imposed by the everyday needs of survival. The player is her own master, dominating and subjecting play to her own motives. To be at play is simply to be free or as Huizinga put it, “play to order is not longer play: it could at best be but a forcible imitation of it” (p. 7). Huizinga’s position suggests that play falls within an area of individual dominion that can either be ignited or extinguished at will. For him the reality of play is dependent on the subject. Indeed, “play can be deferred and suspended at any time. It is never imposed by physical necessity or moral duty. It is never a task” (p. 8). In Huizinga’s conception human beings are not determined to play; it is only a possibility actualized because “they enjoy playing, and therein precisely lies their freedom” (p. 8). Play, then, “is free, is in fact freedom” (p. 8).

A second condition of play speaks to the voluntary decision to enter a domain separated from regular or everyday existence. Human beings choose to

explore a highly differentiated reality, one that is not ordinary or real. It could be said that play is outside of the mundane. Play, Huizinga said, is “distinct from ‘ordinary’ life both as to locality and duration. . . . It contains its own course and meaning” (p. 9). This secludedness aspect of play is relevant because it marks off limits of time and space that establish its very attractiveness. “Play casts a spell over us; it is ‘enchanted,’ ‘captivating”” (p. 10). It is precisely the possibility of stepping out from the ordinary that propels human beings to voluntarily engage in that altered reality. Play has its own boundaries; limits that are often created or recreated by the players, marks that create a special kind of order within a chaotic world. The confines of play are reigned by an orderliness whose particularity resides in its capacity to control but at the same time produce that order. In this regard Huizinga affirmed that “play demands order absolute and supreme” (p. 10). Deviations from the extraordinary and orderly world created by play within the ordinary and disorderly world break down and dissipate its poignant extraordinariness.

The fact that play is radically different from everyday life allows Huizinga to introduce another characteristic of play. If play is a pause in our daily routines, it is not subservient to any need beyond itself. Simply put, play is disinterested. As a secluded realm, Huizinga affirmed, play “stands outside the immediate satisfaction of wants and appetites, indeed it interrupts the appetitive process” (p. 9). Although Huizinga admitted that play contributes to human well-being, he clarifies his thesis saying that play is not productive in the sense work is, i.e., the

satisfaction of “immediate material interests or the individual satisfaction of biological needs” (p. 9). On the contrary, play is non-productive because it does not intend “the acquisition of the necessities of life” (p. 9). Play does not respond to externally imposed goals. Its motives are self-contained and separated from the solemn business of life dominated, according to Huizinga, by a spirit of earnestness.

Play could be seen as trivial or as an intrusion into the important duties of life from a productive, cost-benefit point of view. This supposed inferiority comes when the frivolity of play is contrasted to the seriousness of work. However, Huizinga believed that play might proceed with the utmost seriousness. Indeed, play “turns to seriousness and seriousness to play” (p. 8). Huizinga warned about the rigidity and scope of traditional theories of play for “we are accustomed to think of play and seriousness as an absolute antithesis. It would seem, however, that this does not go to the heart of the matter” (p. 18). Play could be very serious and although it remains essentially useless in the sense indicated above, it cannot be deemed as peripheral to human life. Play does not exclude seriousness; the intensity of some players seems to be enough confirmation of Huizinga’s claim. Play, then, might be for seriousness, frivolity, or might alternate between the two.

Finally, Huizinga advanced that play is always circumscribed by rules. The sacredness of the spatio-temporal limitedness of play is wiped out when players excuse themselves from abiding by or overlook the rules governing play.

Those who ruin play step out, in Huizinga's eyes, from a superior reality to return to common reality. The rules of play allow for the creation of the treasured secrecy. Throughout *Homo Ludens* Huizinga insisted that breaking rules spoils play. This collapse is by no means to be promoted. Play has to be protected.

The analysis of the formal characteristics of play, allowed Huizinga to demarcate this aspect of life and propose the following definition:

Play is a voluntary activity or occupation executed within certain fixed limits of time and place, according to rules freely accepted but absolutely binding, having its aim in itself and accompanied by a feeling of tension, joy and the consciousness that it is "different" from "ordinary life." (p. 28)

After describing play Huizinga ventured "to call the category 'play' as one of the most fundamental in life," (p. 28) because it is the vehicle by which culture develops and advances. Huizinga argued that play creates and recreates culture. He argued that play takes two basic forms "under which we meet it: as a contest *for* something or a representation *of* something" (p. 13). For him, games and rituals constituted archetypical instances of play expressions. He said that, as a kind of representation, "the ritual act has all the formal and essential characteristics of play . . . particularly in so far as it transports the participants to another world" (p. 18) that is experienced in holy earnest. This allowed Huizinga to reaffirm that play can be extremely serious. Although rituals contain the play element, Huizinga found that play is overwhelmingly present in contests; playful

contests serve as the driving forces behind such activities as law, war, science, poetry, philosophy, art and other paradigmatic cultural institutions.

Eugen Fink's work "The Ontology of Play" relates in a peculiar manner to the analytic of play attempted by Huizinga. On the one hand, Fink converged with Huizinga in his effort to conceptualize the elements that differentiate play from other phenomena. The project of characterization is important to Fink because he considered, in spite of Huizinga's seminal effort, that "it is still in question whether our age has reached a deep understanding of the nature of play" (Fink, 1979, p. 73).<sup>2</sup> His study revolved around constructing "a preliminary characterization of the phenomenon-play; the analysis of its structure" (pp. 73-74). On the other hand, Fink diverged from the path traversed by Huizinga. After having described the characteristics of play, Fink oriented his investigation towards the relationship between play and the "mysterious meaning of his [human] existence" (p. 76) instead of focusing on the role of play as a building force in a number of cultural institutions. In a sense, Fink shifted the analysis from an anthropological point of view to an ontological one in which play allows a certain kind of experiencing of the self and the world.

Fink's characterization of play is an account that suggests an intuitive approach, for play "is a vital fact which each of us knows subjectively" (p. 74). Play is a phenomenon universally experienced. It is precisely this universality

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<sup>2</sup> Throughout this chapter whenever I quote Fink, it is in reference to his article "The Ontology of Play." Therefore, hereafter, when quoting Fink I will only provide the specific page citation in the text.



that permits its recognition and scrutiny. Fink, however, much like Huizinga, disapproved of the dualities through which play has been explained. He affirmed that as soon as we accept dichotomies such as work-play or seriousness-frivolity to apprehend the significance of play, there is a trivialization of a phenomenon that escapes the narrowness of these pairs. In other words, in those frameworks, play is not only relegated to the less important and dispensable component of life in virtue of the omnipresent duties of human existence, but it is also obscured and deformed. If play is to be understood, Fink advised, it does not have to be opposed to any other phenomenon. Play, he continued, as any other fundamental human phenomenon, never appears in isolation, making its study even more difficult. Nevertheless, because of people's intimate acquaintance with play, Fink advanced that it is a fundamental phenomenon of life whose finalities are entirely internal. Play is self-sufficient. The difference between play and other realms of existence such as love, work, or domination is that play "is not linked to the other fundamental phenomena in a common pursuit of the ultimate end" (p. 77).

The first essential element of play for Fink is what he labeled as a *passion of the soul*. A human being is always affected by a state of the soul. At play, a human being is enwrapped in joy, for it "reigns in it as undisputed master at each moment" (p. 77). As soon as joy disappears, play vanishes. However, and in spite of this relationship, the "joy arising from play is a singular pleasure, difficult to put your finger on" (p. 77). The joy of play is neither exclusively hedonistic nor

immaterial, it transcends these categories as when a person enters a new “universe’, into the objective world” (p. 78). The joy of play is the ecstatic step forward into spontaneous creativity. This joy has a double significance for Fink. It is the ecstasy of spontaneity but also an attitude as well.

Fink’s joyous attitude is similar to that of Huizinga’s in that it points to a number of interrelated elements of play. In so far as it is a special kind of pleasure, play always establishes meaning. For Fink, this meaning can be internal, as it is for the player, or external, as it is for the spectator. The second sense of meaning suggests that play is communal. To play is to be “open to our neighbor as partner” (p. 78). For Fink “play is not, as far as its structure is concerned, an individual and isolated action” (p. 78). Even solitary play is not so because we play with imaginary partners. Play is a social possibility. In other words, play is relational.

However, play is relational as it relates to others but also because it demands equipment. Fink believed that playthings are also hard to define because “each plaything symbolizes the totality of real things” (p. 79). I take Fink to be claiming that playthings confront people with their limitations. In a sense, playthings make people test that which is real by way of confronting them with constraints that allow transformation and permit a journey to the unreal.

Playthings alter people’s sense of reality by reminding them of who they are. Fink called this state the consciousness of the double existence, for at play we live *reality* and *illusion*. Indeed, this duality, which is evocative of Huizinga’s

secludedness, “belongs to the very nature of play” (p. 79). While at play people are conscious of everyday reality. However, even though the sense of having their feet on the ground is not lost, people bring to that dimension the illusion that distinguishes play—ecstatic joy. For Fink this is possible because, through its rules, play establishes the context for the reality-illusion pair. “There is no play without a commitment agreed upon and accepted” (p. 78).

All the previous elements of play are present and condensed in what Fink called the *world of play*. This world of play is a world within the common world. It does not respond to mundane time and space; it has its interior space and proper time. It is an imaginary world that frees humans from the burdens of everyday life. Play lifts humans “from an imprisonment depressing by nature” (p. 80) and brings them *possibilities*. In short, play is freedom and representation. Fink summarized his concept saying that “play is a creation through the medium of pleasure of a world of imaginary activity” (p. 80).

Fink emphasized the centrality of imagination when people play. He referred to imagination as the *appearing-to-be*, a concept whose meaning, he admitted, is difficult to comprehend and define. To the extent that play is creation, its effect “is exercised in the sphere of the ‘appearing-to-be’” (p. 81). This special state of the appearing-to-be seems to correlate with the secludedness of the world of play. Indeed, it is possible within that world. The appearing-to-be is “a kind of being apart” (p. 82); it is the unreal on the surface of the real. There is a reflection of the *true* being in the appearing-to-be, which is a

way of being within being. In simple terms, appearing-to-be is taking up playing roles or as Fink put it, projecting “imaginary worlds of play;” it “is by priority counted as a structural element in the world of play” (p. 82). In other words, play is a reality that reflects the being, the life of the player. The creation performed by the player presents meanings that are clues to understand the world and life.

Much like Huizinga and Fink, Bernard Suits’ interest is the investigation of the structure of play; however, unlike them, Suits contrasted play to other phenomena. For example, in his “Tricky Triad: Games, Play and Sport” he explored the relations among these three phenomena and contrasted the characteristics of games, sports, and play.

Suits started asking if games are not “*play* when they are undertaken as ends in themselves, by amateurs, that is, by those whose gaming is for the love of it, in contrast to professionals, whose gaming is for sometimes astronomical salaries?” (Suits, 1995, p. 16).<sup>3</sup> For Suits the dichotomy between amateurs and professionals resembles and reproduces the difference between play and work. The former is acknowledged as non-serious and non-instrumental. On the other hand, work conveys that which is serious and instrumental. Therefore, by definition, amateurs play and professionals work.

Suits, however, dispensed with the words *amateur* and *professional* because, in spite of their literal meaning, each term tends to strongly suggest that it is merely the opposite of its counterpart. Suits proposed to substitute the

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<sup>3</sup> Throughout this chapter I quote three works by Suits. Therefore, hereafter, when quoting Suits I will provide the specific year and page citation in the texts.

phrase amateur event or activity for the phrase *autotelic event or activity*, which suggests that whatever a person is involved in is valued for its own sake. In turn, Suits advanced the phrase *instrumental event or activity* to replace the expression professional event or activity, which speaks to the expectation to receive a further payoff from the realm a person is involved in (1995, p. 21). The difference between amateurs and professionals mirrors that of play and work. Suits' influential introduction of autotelicity and instrumentalism as better descriptors of the motives behind amateurs and professionals suggests that play refers to autotelicity and work to instrumentality.

Suits' distinction is useful because it helps to understand complex situations that were simplistically solved with the amateur-professional dichotomy. Amateurs, for example, might also be involved in an event or activity for the sake of an ulterior benefit. As Suits said, there are some people "who play or game for them [instrumental payoffs] though not called professionals, are engaged, I shall argue, in instrumental rather than in autotelic activities every bit as much as are professionals" (1995, p. 21). In addressing the vexing issue of whether professionals play or not, Suits confirmed what he advanced in *The Grasshopper*, namely, that play is only play when whatever one is doing, it is done for its own sake (1990, p. 15). Succinctly, for Suits, play is play and work is work. They do not overlap.

Suits, who was a keen observer of the complexities of play, considered that there was something else to this phenomenon than autotelicity and moved

on to revise and construct a refined definition. In his article “Words on Play” he tries to demonstrate that “there is no logical relationship whatever between playing and playing games” (1988, p. 19). However, Suits clarified that this is not to deny that “game-playing very often *is* playing” (1988, p. 19). He convincingly acknowledged that “one cannot conclude that *because* x is an instance of playing that x is therefore an instance of game playing, and also that one cannot conclude that *because* y is an instance of game playing that it is therefore an instance of playing” (1988, p. 19). Suits, faithful to his methodology, continued his investigation by seeing how play is unlike games.

Suits said that games and play are entirely independent from each other as are the terms light and blue. Light has an implied opposite, that is darkness. Similarly, play has an implied opposite, that is seriousness or a particular kind of seriousness. On the contrary, blue has no such opposite that provides it with an identity; it is, in a sense autonomous. Games are like blue, they have no implied opposite. Suits rhetorically asked “what is the opposite of blue? Green? Red? What is the opposite of chess? Handball? Poker?” (1988, p. 20).

Suits claimed that play is always relational. When people play there is a sense in which they play *with* something and this entails a “tacit ‘instead of treating it [this something] seriously’ in our meaning” (1988, p. 20). In other words, play implies not treating whatever people have in hand earnestly. Suits suggested that play appears contrasted, once again, with work or instrumental activities. However, it is not merely the fact that play is so by virtue of people

being engaged in an activity for its own sake; rather play involves doing whatever people enjoy doing despite the fact that they know there is serious, more important business waiting to be taken care of. This, for Suits, confirmed the hypothesis that play must be seen in relationship to something else.

Play, Suits continued, also refers to the use of resources that were originally intended for instrumental activities usually regarded as serious for life that are now being used for autotelic activities. This reallocation of resources constitutes the playing *with*, the not being prudent with assets that supposedly await earnest utilization or employment and have a higher call on life. A person is, then, at play when a resource having an instrumental purpose is diverted to and regarded as an end in itself.

Suits' revised definition of play emphasizes that it is not only the autotelicity experienced in the activities pursued that define this realm of life but the conditions under which these activities are realized as well. Suits' own words are revealing, he offered his formal definition of play as follows: "*x is playing if and only if x has made a temporary reallocation to autotelic activities of resources primarily committed to instrumental purposes*" (1988, p. 22).

Although for Suits any resource having a primary instrumental allocation would meet what his definition requires, he emphasized *time* because it is a "resource that is always required for every pursuit" (1988, p. 23). The fact that time is always needed for whatever people wish to do allowed Suits to comment on the nature of play and its relation to aesthetic activities such as sculpting,

writing poetry, or listening to Vivaldi. For Suits it was not merely the fact they are intrinsically valued pursuits that make them play but also the *conditions* under which they are pursued. That qualifies them for this designation. He stated that the “conditions must be such that the time used for such pursuits is viewed in contrast to a situation in which that time *ought* to be used for an activity which has a higher claim upon it” (1988, p. 23).

### **2.1.2 The nature of games and their relationship to play**

Roger Caillois, a French philosopher, criticized Huizinga’s definition of play as being both too narrow and too broad. It was too narrow in the extent to which Huizinga prioritized the agonistic and mysterious elements of play. For Caillois the latter even contradicted Huizinga’s position because play “exposes, publicizes and in a way expends secrecy, tending, in a word, to deprive it of its very nature” (Caillois, 1988, p. 7).<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, it was too broad insofar as Huizinga did not clearly demarcate the sphere of play. Huizinga’s definition, for Caillois, “gives one to understand that play could consist in the representation of something” (p. 8). Virtually anything, he pointed out, can be represented at anytime.

However, Caillois agreed with Huizinga that play is an activity that is freely chosen, separated from ordinary time and space, and regulated by a temporal

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<sup>4</sup> Throughout this chapter whenever I quote Caillois, it is in reference to his article “The Structure and Classification of Games”. Therefore, hereafter, when quoting Caillois I will only provide the specific page citation in the text.



law that only counts within its duration (p. 8). Accepting the *genus proximum*, play, established by Huizinga, Caillois' goal was to "state precisely the *differentia specifica* of each subsidiary category" (p. 8). According to Caillois play can be divided in four species. Each category is "uniformly marked by the particular characteristic of one of the elements that compose it" (p. 9). The classification is as follows:

1. *Agon*: this category includes games that are contested. Equality of chance and skillful merit as a source of achieving victory are the main distinguishable traits of this type of games.

2. *Alea*: in this group of games skillful merit is overcome by fate and destiny. Although *alea* shares with *agon* the attempt at establishing equality of conditions, it negates effort and recognizes luck.

3. *Mimicry*: within this category falls all games in which there is an attempt to simulate or represent something that the player is not. These games are about being another, disguising personalities and making others believe the mutation is real.

4. *Ilinx*: this category includes games whose purpose is to alter the body's stability, to escape usual perception, and to obtain a different kind of awareness.

Caillois recognized that his detailed categories and its interrelations "do not cover the world of play in its entirety" (p. 8). For that reason he complemented and subjected them to another categorization that, as a

continuum, goes from “a common principle of diversion” to “deliberately hindering conventions in order to obtain a perfectly useless although strictly determinate result” (p. 8). The former is called *paidia*, the latter *ludus*.

*Paidia* is for Caillois the spontaneous manifestation of play. It is the freedom that moves and captivates the player. “This freedom is the indispensable prime mover of play, and remains at the origins of its most complex and rigidly organized forms” (p. 11). *Paidia* is evocative of Huizinga’s and Fink’s joy but Caillois did not highlight this similarity. *Ludus*, on the other hand, is “the taste for gratuitous difficulty,” (p. 11) which is the driving force behind games. It designates the acceptance of an artificially created problem for the satisfaction that solving it makes possible. Far from being opposites, *paidia* and *ludus* inform each other and color the four categories of play.

Caillois’ work attempted to identify play in domains that Huizinga largely neglected. The former agreed with the latter in that play is sedimented in social institutions. However, Caillois did not advance Huizinga’s main descriptors of play, that is freedom, separation, and regulation. Indeed, Caillois admitted that the “prime importance [of these three attributes] I in no way challenge” (p. 8). The faithful Caillois only extended them to other activities without even questioning their validity, although he argued, against Huizinga, that play can be productive (p. 7). In this regard, games of chance such as those played in casinos are not devoid of material interest.

Caillois maintained the view that games are a sub specie of play. This is a common approach stipulating that games (*agon*, *alea*, *mimicry*, *illinx*) are the paradigmatic object of play because they occur “under precise and fixed circumstances, isolated from the rest of reality, and when one is free to accept or refuse it” (p. 14). For him the fact of being engaged in games secures the emergence of the extraordinariness of play. For example, when referring to *agon*, *alea* and *mimicry* Caillois said that “all three definitely belong to the realm of play” (p. 8).

Bernard Suits’ engaging work *The Grasshopper* illuminates Caillois’ study by constructing and defending a theory of games. In doing so, the former substantiates the work of the latter. However, before exploring the logic of games, Suits drew a distinction between play and work. As noted in the previous section, work is defined at the outset of his intellectual excursion as “doing things we value for the sake of something else” and play is “doing things we value for their own sake” (Suits, 1990, p. 15).

In spite of Suits’ basic distinction between play and work the merit of *The Grasshopper* resides in the novel account of games expounded, an account that shifts the focus of attention from ends to the relationship between ends and means. As Suits explained, it is not the result of the game per se that interests the participant but the *bringing about* of these results. In other words, restrictions on how participants can bring about a result mold games. The force of this point might be better illustrated by Suits’ portable version of his definition of game-

playing: “playing a game is the voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles” (1990, p. 41). Games appear to be nothing more than artificially manufactured problems. According to Suits, games are activities that contain a number of elements that make those activities not only intelligible but also distinct from other kind of actions.

Games, Suits said, are unintelligible without ends, thus they are goal-directed activities. Games require a state of affairs or objectives that have to be achieved. In the game of football, for example, the goal is to make the football pass over the goal line, between the goalposts, and under the crossbar. Suits called this kind of goal the *prelusory goal* of a game “because it can be described before, or independently of, any game of which it may be, or come to be, a part” (1990, p. 37). However, there is a second kind of goal in games, that is the goal of winning the game. Suits labeled this goal as the *lusory goal* of a game because “winning can be described only in terms of the game in which it figures” (1990, p. 37). The lusory goal presupposes and is dependent on the prelusory goal, for this reason the prelusory goal is deemed as an “elementary component of game playing” (1990, p. 36).

The second element in defining games is the means allowed to be used while attempting to solve the prelusory goal. In games, Suits argued, people are not interested in the employment of any means whatsoever; on the contrary, they are interested only in means that are permitted for winning. The means permitted and available to accomplish the prelusory goal are called *lusory*

*means*. These means play a crucial role in understanding games. Goals and means, as I will soon argue, maintain a curious relationship in games; they strongly depend on each other. In a sense, the always delicate balance between goals and means constitute the core of games. The regulation of this relationship of interdependency, that is the delineation of the quality, character, and charm of games, is performed by rules, the so-called rules of the game.

The rules of the game determine what is permitted and what is not permitted in achieving the prelusory goal. The kind of rules that set out all the conditions that a participant of a game may engage in while trying to attain the prelusory goal are called *constitutive rules*. These guidelines explicitly prescribe certain procedures for prelusory goal achievement, permit others, and proscribe still others. The peculiarity, value, and attraction of the constitutive rules is that they fall short of allowing ultimate means for achieving the prelusory goal. For example in football, given the nature of the prelusory goal, players are not allowed to use external devices such as a ball kicking machine nor their hands to accomplish that prelusory goal. If the constitutive rules of football were to allow the use of such means, that is, ultimate or dangerously-close-to-ultimate means, the qualities of the game would change dramatically.

Games do not accept, cannot accept, two extremes: absolute laxity (the incapacity to sustain or lack of structure) or absolute rigidity (the incapacity to move or lack of flexibility). On the one hand, if the constitutive rules of a game allow any means to achieve the prelusory goal, the game perishes due to an

excess of looseness (absolute laxity). On the other hand, if the constitutive rules of a game prohibit all means to achieve the prelusory goal, the game perishes due to a lack of looseness (absolute rigidity). In other words, constitutive rules have to avoid making the achievement of the prelusory goal either too easy or too difficult. To summarize rules as an element of games, it is possible to say that the constitutive rules of games produce and preserve a tension between the vulnerability and the impregnability of the prelusory goal by way of manipulation of the means available to achieve such a goal. The selection of less efficient in deference to more efficient means for reaching a prelusory goal is what characterizes constitutive rules of games.<sup>5</sup>

What Suits showed is that in games there is a radical inseparability of rules and ends. Indeed, in principle they need each other. However, this requirement of games is bound to an extremely important qualification: “the means permitted by the rules are narrower in range than they would be in the absence of the rules” (1990, p. 30). To put it differently, *how* people strive to achieve the goals of games is as important, in terms of Suits’ definitional effort, as, precisely, these goals.

The final element in Suits’ account of games explains why people accept the aforementioned *how*, that is the restriction of permissible means to an end. Constitutive rules are analogous to moral rules to the extent that both kinds of regulations place strict limitations on the means that someone has to reach a

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<sup>5</sup> For a complete analysis of rules in games see Meier (1985), Morgan (1987), and Torres (2000).

desired goal. But the reasons for accepting these limitations diverge noticeably between games and ethics.

How is it that games differ from morality? Suits said that in games rules are obeyed “because such obedience is a necessary condition for my engaging in the activity such obedience makes possible” (1990, p. 31). The goal of a footballer is not simply to make the football pass over the goal line, between the goalposts, and under the crossbar per se but to do so only by obeying the constitutive rules. On the contrary, when someone, let’s say the same footballer that accepts the rules of football just so the game can occur, refrains from supplementing his meager salary by robbing people during the off season, she does not accept the moral rule prohibiting robbing people because it makes the off-season more enjoyable. Rather she accepts the moral rule because society, and probably she herself, judges robbing to be wrong. As Suits himself explained, in morality “obedience to rules make the action right, but in games it makes the action” (1990, p. 32). Games present artificial, but not for that less tasteful, hurdles. The acceptance of the artificiality of the hurdles so that the hurdling can be experienced is what Suits calls the *lusory attitude*.

With the introduction of the lusory attitude Suits coalesced the various elements of game-playing and provided a formal definition. He said that,

To play a game is to attempt to achieve a specific state of affairs [prelusory goal], using only means permitted by rules [lusory means], where the rules prohibit use of more efficient in favour of

less efficient means [constitutive rules], and where the rules are accepted just because they make possible such activity [lusory attitude]. (1990, p. 41).

Suits' conception of what constitutes a game is very powerful. His de-emphasis on ends and focus on the relationship between means and ends provide a provocative account of the structure of games. When observing the roles that rules occupy in games, it becomes clearer why games are often seen as a species of play. Games are stable, orderly, and rule-governed activities that facilitate the perception that they represent a realm secluded from ordinary life. The conventionality of the roadblocks that games propose reinforces the notion that they not only constitute endeavors radically different from regular problems encountered in ordinary life but that they can be chosen at will. Game hurdles need not be faced.

Accepting rules for the sake of the activity they make possible and not because such acceptance makes the activity right moves games close to play. Games are self-contained, perfect circles; they are activities whose instrumentality is "inseparably combined with what is intrinsically valuable, and where the activity is not itself an instrument for some further end" (1990, p. 172). Suits clarified that "in games we must have obstacles which we can strive to overcome *just so that* we can possess the activity as a whole, namely, playing the game" (1990, p. 172). Although Suits (1995) argued against the conflation of games and play, the intrinsic value of the lusory attitude reminds of the autotelic



character of play. Therefore, the temptation to follow Caillois using Suits rationale and proclaim that to follow and enjoy the internal logic of games is to follow and enjoy the internal logic of play.

## **2.2 Normative analyses of play**

This section of the chapter examines accounts of play that consider this phenomenon as neither homogeneous nor normatively uniform. The focus of normative approaches of play is to identify and describe distinctions within play by systematically illuminating its immediate experience. In doing so, these approaches emphasize the dynamic and complex character of play while minimizing the objectification of its experience. Normative analyses of play attempt to find the internal qualities that give play its unique value and based on these qualities they separate play from play. In other words, these accounts establish different types of play and recognize in them different normative value.

In considering qualitative distinctions, normative analyses of play, make evaluative speculations and judgments about the importance of promoting different levels of play in human life. In this regard, this section also explores studies whose focus is the sphere of play and its meaning as it relates to religious experiences. These theological studies consider whether play provides a path to salvation and eternity or represents an unjustifiable distraction from duties to God. The primary objective of these religious approaches to play is to

evaluate the experience of play in order to justify or condemn its celebration on earth. For theologians of play human life can only be lived meaningfully after such an examination.

### 2.2.1 Qualities of play

R. Scott Kretchmar started his “Qualitative Distinction in Play” wondering whether his jogging routine deserved to be classified as rich play, unsatisfying play, or not play at all. More importantly, he was “not sure that it is fair to call such running play” (Kretchmar, 1992, p. 3).<sup>6</sup> Noticing that the quality of play varies from experience to experience and recognizing the limitations of formal accounts of play, Kretchmar suggested that “we may be able to learn more about play . . . by attempting to understand *qualitative differences* within this activity, not by focusing on its basic defining characteristics” (1992, p. 3). Accordingly, he developed a new taxonomy of play and as a consequence of that, a strategy that allows the differentiation of play in terms of its qualitative features. Kretchmar’s overall purpose was to distinguish “varieties of rich play from their lesser counterparts” (1992, p. 4).

Kretchmar took play to be “a way of doing something that is freely chosen, non-obligated, self-sustaining” (1992, p. 4). It is fundamentally an autotelic attitude in contrast to all forms of instrumental or utilitarian orientations. He also

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<sup>6</sup> Throughout this chapter I quote two works by Kretchmar. Therefore, hereafter, when quoting Kretchmar I will provide the specific year and page citation in the texts.

claimed that play is a contextual concept that gains its sense in relation to a contrasting background. Because of that, and following Suits' assertion that play is a relational concept, Kretchmar believed that it requires a "meaning-grounded choice to reallocate resources" (1992, p. 5) thought to have a higher priority for instrumental purposes in life. In short, for Kretchmar, play is a way of approaching things that is "autotelic in nature and necessarily includes the experience of reallocating resources commonly used for other purposes" (1992, p. 8). Kretchmar's position differs from that of Suits' in that the former did not refer to a rationally chosen reallocation but to its experiential dimension.

Finally, Kretchmar clarified that when the reallocation occurs with an excess of resources (time and energy, for example) it turns out to be a prudent reallocation. On the other hand, when the reallocation occurs with a lack of resources and is done in spite of the harmful consequences, it is imprudent. Consequently, Kretchmar concluded that there are "two fundamental species of play . . . prudent and imprudent play" (1992, p. 5).

In addition this formal characterization of play involves, for Kretchmar, two moments. The first moment is active; it refers to the human predisposition to play. This moment requires people to be open and disposed, to desire and to look for the seduction of play. The second moment is passive. It is "the call to play offered by environments or playgrounds" (1992, p. 6). Both moments are necessary conditions for play to happen. However, neither one by itself, is a guarantor of such a happening.

Kretchmar's second moment of play involves "two species of invitations—one acquisitive, the other celebrative" (1992, p. 8). The former presents a test, a problem that invites the player to seek its resolution. When the challenge offered by acquisitive play is shared by at least two people committed to surpass one another, tests are transformed into contests. These kinds of play invitations remind us of "something desirable that we have not yet acquired" (1990, p. 6). For Kretchmar the most important value of acquisitive play resides in Huizinga's notions of tension and uncertainty found in agonistic endeavors.

The second variety of play, celebrative play, does not include uncertainty. There is no invitation to test whether one can accomplish a goal or not; neither does it involve a will to show superiority in a contest. Celebrative play is "a delight in expressing, experiencing, and being—in other words, in celebrating life" (1992, p. 7). The most powerful aspect of this mode of play is joy. Huizinga's work also resonates here. In his account Kretchmar speculated that neither one of these categories is superior to the other in their capacity to ignite and sustain rich play.

After describing the fundamental features of play and its two primary species, Kretchmar made an important move towards the quest for qualitative distinctions. He suggested that within acquisitive and celebrative play there are two experientially different modes of play, namely the narrative and aesthetic modes.

Narrative play sees human beings “as fundamentally meaning-seeking, story-telling creatures who value coherence” (1992, p. 9). It operates at two levels simultaneously. One level confronts people with transhistorical and universal questions about human existence. The second level speaks to the individual player, and to her personal and local histories. The former level deals with issues of humanity at large while the second refers to the particular person I am in my historical circumstances and the possibilities it offers. Narrative play is based on the premise that human beings are primarily relational creatures who establish their identity in community.

Aesthetic play sees human beings “as fundamentally stimulus-seeking, choice-making individuals who value their uniqueness and freedom” (1992, p. 9). The emphasis in this conception is in forging and affirming an identity by exercising individual choice. Aesthetic play is influenced by the view that human beings are entirely autonomous builders of their identity, structure, and life projects.

Narrative and aesthetic play are clearly distinctive but they neither constitute opposite ends of a scale nor are they mutually exclusive. However, each instance of play highlights different core values. Narrative play moves us and promotes the encounter with “community, poignancy . . . and being connected with one’s past” (1992, p. 9). Aesthetic play places value on “individuality, ecstasy, stimulation, and good feeling” (1992, p. 9). This differentiation, Kretchmar asserted, is grounded in alternative understandings of

what people need from play. From these divergent views there proceed “different interpretations of what it is not just to play, but to play well” (1992, p. 10).

According to Kretchmar, in social milieus such as the North American one, which emphasizes the values of hedonism, aesthetic play is often appreciated as the superior variety of play. However, he argued that narrative play is normatively superior to aesthetic play. In the first place, narrative play is more durable in the sense that its richness and plasticity seduce people to return to it; they write their life stories around these invitations. As Kretchmar said, “both the narrative-plot of my life and my character can evolve in this craft, this playground, in more ways that I can now imagine” (1992, p. 11). On the other hand, aesthetic play is short-lived. Its excitement is not powerful enough to spawn the encounter over and over again. Therefore, it does not provide the meaningful experience so that characters and life stories evolve from it. The limitedness of aesthetic play’s attraction forces people to move from playground to playground in search of enjoyment. Aesthetic play produces *ludic nomads* (1992, p. 11). Kretchmar’s normative judgment is based not only on the durability of narrative play but, more importantly, on the judgment that human beings “cannot live well or happily without myths and narrative coherence” (1992, p. 12).

Reflecting about his jogging routine under the light of his findings, Kretchmar doubted that is was the kind of play he wished for. His jogging, which was part of his unfolding narrative and once provided challenges and enjoyment,

had become “a sedating interlude, something that gets me through frequently stressful days” (1992, p. 13). “If this experience is at all a common one,” he concluded, “we need to find ways not just to promote play, but to promote a certain quality of this activity” (1992, p. 13).

Drew Hyland was also interested in comprehending different levels of the human experience of play. His aim was to explore what makes play so appealing to human beings. Hyland stated at the outset of his book *The Question of Play* that he is not convinced that a definition of play can be given. He questioned efforts to “get clear on our basic concepts” (Hyland, 1984, p. xxii)<sup>7</sup> because this thinking “seems based on the model of an axiomatic system in mathematics” (1984, p. xxii). For Hyland this way of reasoning treats issues as *problems* that await *solutions*. He regarded this approach as inadequate for experiential issues such as play because it weakens and distances itself from the phenomenon. On the contrary, Hyland believed that play can be better known through a way of thinking that “enables us to deepen that experience, to appreciate it more, to preserve it more authentically and so to live it out all the more fully” (1984, p. xv). The thinking he had in mind is “in part a stance, an orientation toward things, which we can practice, preserve, nurture” (1984, p. xvi).

For Hyland, people, when at play, have a certain orientation towards the world, one that is highly distinctive. Although for him this way of comportment is

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<sup>7</sup> Throughout this chapter I quote two works by Hyland. Therefore, hereafter, when quoting Hyland I will provide the specific year and page citation in the texts.

“not utterly peculiar, [it] is nevertheless different from our mode of comportment when we consider ourselves not to be playing” (1984, p. 45). It is precisely this orientation, something he labels *the stance of play*, that is the locus of his investigation. Hyland’s project is to intentionally characterize the stance of play by way of capturing something of the orientation that makes this stance what it is.

For Kretchmar, as well as for Hyland, play has more to do with an orientation, a way to relate to an activity rather than with the specific details of the activity itself. But for Kretchmar this orientation is necessarily autotelic and includes a reallocation of resources. Hyland, of course, implicitly rejected such definitional characterizations. However, similar to Kretchmar, he believes that play involves two moments. Hyland’s first feature in the stance of play is one of *openness*. This moment requires me “to have a heightened sense of openness toward my surrounding” (1984, p. 47). It is being aware of the subtle changes in the world I am immersed in; in short, openness is about being awake, noticing the dynamic and flow of reality. For Hyland play situations demand a degree of openness that is not present in non-play situations.

Hyland’s second decisive moment in the stance of play is dependent on the first, for it is hardly sufficient to be open, notice changes, and leave them at that. Rather, as Hyland put it, “I have to be capable of *responding* to that openness in a way called for by the situation” (1984, p. 47). Unlike Kretchmar’s second moment of play—the passive one—Hyland’s second moment is also active because it requires that people respond to the possibilities openness bring



about. For Hyland *responsiveness* rather than the quality of the play invitation is the completing side of the stance of play. “Responsiveness, then could be called a second ‘moment’ in the stance of play” (1984, p. 47).

The two elements together, openness and responsiveness, constitute the very structure of the stance of play, which Hyland called *responsive openness*. In this structure Hyland found the explanation to the total immersion people experience while involved in different realms of human life. This immersion, which resembles the autotelic character of play advanced, for example, by Suits and Kretchmar is for Hyland “often part of the appeal of play” (1984, p. 48).

Hyland asserted that his stance of play as responsive openness “does not admit of a rigid dichotomy between playful and unplayful activities, but rather places them on a continuum” (1984, p. 48). He also suggested that what he has in mind is a matter of degree. Undoubtedly, Hyland emphasized the moment of play that Kretchmar concentrated on less—the active moment. However, Hyland somewhat recognized the value of Kretchmar’s passive moment, arguing that some activities “may *invite* the stance of responsive openness (though not guarantee it) whereas others may tend to preclude it” (1984, p. 49). Responsive openness and environments are both necessary, although for Hyland the priority is to be found in the former.

The stance of play as responsive openness has for Hyland priority over other interpretations of play because it is primordially grounded in human nature. Human beings are contradictory creatures. This structure is found in the form of

three paradoxical ways in which humans “experience themselves—namely, as both incomplete and overfull, monadic and relational, and dominant and submissive” (Kretchmar, 1990, p. 46). Hyland asserted that these “bear on the stance of play as responsive openness” (Hyland, 1984, p. 51).

The first paradox has to do with the human hesitancy between an experience of incompleteness and one of overfullness. During the former there is a desire for totality or wholeness. On the other hand, in the attempt “to overcome experienced incompleteness, we also experience . . . a kind of *overfullness* and *over-flowing*, in which, as we say, we *ex-press* ourselves” (1984, p. 52). Play, as responsive openness, is a consequence of people’s incomplete-overfullness nature. For Hyland, if people were not incomplete there would not be reason to be open. As with incompleteness, if people lack the experience of expressing themselves due to overfullness, they simply would not be responsive.

The second paradox speaks to the debated interpretation of humans as either monadic or relational. According to the former, people are by nature inclined to express autonomy and independence. Contrary to this view, and according to the latter, establishing relations with others is not something peripheral but rather an essential aspect of human nature. However, Hyland highlighted that there is a third view, to which he subscribed, indicating the co-presence of both conceptions of what it is to be human. This position allowed him to argue that there is coherence between people’s incomplete-overfullness

dimension and the nomadic-relational one, and that play is founded in such a conception.

As monadic, people embody a sort of overfullness that allows them to enter into relationship with others. However, as relational, people reveal an incompleteness to be overcome. People's openness to the world is a consequence of the relational nature while the responsive character comes from the overfullness of being found in people's monadic nature. If people were only monadic and thus utterly incomplete they would not be open; and if people were just relational and totally complete they would not be responsive. As Hyland proclaimed, "again, we play by nature" (1984, p. 58).

A third paradox is to be found in the tension between dominance and submission. The tendency to dominance relates to the human desire to bear power and control over other human beings and nature. The converse tendency, submission, relates to a passive attitude of accepting things as they are. Hyland saw a connection between this duality, the aforementioned ones, and the stance of play. Dominance "could be understood as a kind of radicalized overfullness" (1984, p. 61) and submission as its equally radicalized incomplete counterpart. Similarly, dominance can be seen as a radicalized display of people's monadic essence and submission as a result of relationality. Although dominance and submission, unlike the other paradoxes, are opposites, there is a relation between them that is present in the stance of play. Hyland clarified the point asserting that "dominance moderated by openness becomes responsiveness,

submission moderated by responsiveness becomes openness” (1990, p. 145). Play as responsive openness is found in a balance between dominance and submission and “in a unity, they become the very spirit, the stance, of play” (1984, p. 62). Play fulfills human nature.

In responsive openness Hyland found a necessary but not a sufficient condition of play. Although he was not after a definition he continued to look for other characteristics present in heightened play. These distinguishing traits—finitude, possibility, and freedom—are intimately connected with his basic tenet.

There are several manifestation of finitude in play. Hyland referred to these manifestations in relation to “that class of play-phenomena which we call games” (1984, p. 64) because the rule-governed characteristic of games entails finitude to be thematized. In games people are called to acknowledge rules and “respond to and in the light of that finitude” (1984, p. 65). Bodily limitation is also highlighted in play. As embodied beings, people’s involvement in play makes manifest their temporal as well as spatial limitations. The fact that people are always situated somewhere and that their specific bodies do not enjoy endless strength, flexibility, speed, or endurance forces them to face those limits. As Hyland put it, at play “our embodiment as limiting, as finitude, comes home to us dramatically” (1990, p. 131).

However, not only mere limitation gets revealed in play. “The reverse side of finitude, as it were, is possibility” (1984, p. 66). Although rules of games limit people, they also allow them the possibility to partake in the activity as

constituted. Moreover, Hyland continued, people's limited embodiment constitutes their possibilities; indeed people's locatedness is the locus of their lived temporal and spatial possibilities. It is through the enactment of limitations that games become meaningful. It is the acknowledgment of the limitations that in turn opens up possibilities in games. The actualization of human possibilities allows the enactment of that meaning.

At play there is a discovery of the intimate connection between finitude and possibility. For Hyland the content of this intimacy is to be found in the notion of freedom. Far from accepting an absolute model of freedom, one in which there is no room for limits, Hyland said that play argues for another conception. Limitations are conditions for genuine freedom. Play experiences, which are rule-bounded, suggest that freedom, and consequently meaning, occur within contexts. At play we "focus our consciousness and our bodies in such a way as to pursue to the end a set of possibilities, and so a realm of freedom" (1984, p. 68).

The power of the triad finitude-possibility-freedom was first observed in play by Joseph Esposito in his article "Play and Possibility." Esposito, who wondered what is in play and games that seduces individuals to engage in them, sets out what he calls "the common-root experience of all game playing" (Esposito, 1995, p. 114)<sup>8</sup>—an element that characterizes play. As Hyland did,

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<sup>8</sup> Throughout this chapter whenever I quote Esposito, it is in reference to his article "Play and Possibility". Therefore, hereafter, when quoting Esposito I will provide the specific page citation in the text.

Esposito saw games as unique activities in which possibility is thematized and made explicit. Games “are contrived situations, the purpose of which is to heighten and bring into focus the interplay between possibility and actuality” (p. 115). Clearly, Esposito agreed with Hyland that limitations provide the “opportunity to experience possibility” (p. 115). Possibility is the distinctive feature of play. Indeed, Esposito asserts that “each form of play . . . should contain within it a moment when possibility can be acutely felt by the player” (p. 115).

Esposito based his conception of play in the work of existential philosophers for whom the experience of possibility is “the source of our understanding of temporality, value, guilt, love and death” (p. 116). However, not every possibility enjoys the same status. Esposito, following Martin Heidegger, said that there are *modal* possibilities and *existentiale* possibilities. These two categories are not lived by human beings with equal seriousness and regard. The former, although certain, constitutes “either what is logically possible or what is ‘merely’ possible” (p. 116). This category of possibilities does not easily enter into people’s life projects. On the contrary, the latter are lived as “*our* possibilities and so become the object of serious concern” (p. 116). That is why a lost possibility is so important.

But possibilities require people to choose, to exercise their freedom. All thinkers do not welcome this fact because the burden of deciding in the face of open possibilities makes humans uneasy. To exercise the freedom to choose is

to lose some other possibilities forever. “The stakes in life itself are too high for us” philosophers such as Soren Kierkegaard or Jean Paul Sartre would contend. Implicitly agreeing with this position Esposito stressed his “characterization of play as an encounter with possibility” (p. 116) and clarified that games provide possibilities with no risk of losing anything serious. When people play there is “a genuine experience of the possible where there is really, from life’s standpoint, nothing at stake” (p. 117).

Esposito’s position can be summarized as saying that play brings about possibilities to exercise freedom outside the realm of serious life. Play is for him, as for many others, secluded or extraordinary. To put it differently, although at play people are confronted with possibilities, these possibilities do not demand obligatory actualization. At play humans are alive without the risks that life inherently offers.

Sam Keen analyzed the risks and consequences of undervaluing the possibilities offered by play and wonder as phenomena that have a unique potential to bring about a meaningful life. Wonder, which Keen argues is found in great quantity in the rich soil of play, has been progressively occluded by an economy whose ethos focuses on production and efficiency. Keen affirmed in his book *Apology for Wonder* that an eclipse of wonder is forced when humans are exiled “too rapidly out of the world of play into the world of work” (Keen, 1969,

p. 58).<sup>9</sup> For him, *homo faber*—working human being—has taken over what he calls *homo admirans*—wondering human being. Keen’s goal was to investigate the place that wonder has occupied in these two models of understanding human beings and “judge whether it must be present in any fully authentic life” (p. 21).

Keen started his investigations by providing an account of wonder as it is encountered in experience. “Wonder begins with the element of surprise;” it is a sudden appearance “that produces amazement or astonishment” (p. 27). Keen, like Kretchmar, noticed the powerful and unique calls offered by the world. The shock of wonder changes the ordinary way that people explain the meaning of the world creating a sense of puzzlement that “reduces us momentarily to silence” (p. 28).

Through the power of making humans silent, wonder fosters a unique kind of ambivalence. On the one hand, wonder awakens a certain dissolution of people’s quotidian way of relating to the world—one that is fearful and threatening. On the other hand, the potentiality of a reality that is new, unfamiliar, and fresh makes wonder attractive and desirable. Wonder disrupts and invites; it makes people speechless while providing an avenue to find a new modulation of voice; it closes and, at the same time, opens. For Keen “the heart of the experience of wonder” can be described “as and *awful-promising surprise*” (p. 29).

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<sup>9</sup> Throughout this chapter whenever I quote Keen, it is in reference to his book *Apology for Wonder*. Therefore, hereafter, when quoting Keen I will provide the specific page citation in the text.



Wonder provides a different reality, one having a dignity that demands admiration. According to Keen, wonder and admiration are inseparable because people admire or rejoice “in the presence of a thing or a person having some desirable grace, strength, dignity, or other positive value” (p. 29). People wonder at things that make life richer; it is precisely in wonder that they recognize that the *other* is an inexhaustible source of meaning and learn about its inviolability. The other in this context is similar to Kretchmar’s second moment of play: the complexity and totality of the invitations coming from the world. For Keen wonder is the foundation of ethics “because a wondering encounter is the basis of a nonutilitarian approach to things and persons” (p. 30). Besides its normative relevance, the recognition that things and persons are ends in themselves positions wonder close to the autotelic character of play advanced among others by Huizinga, Suits, and Kretchmar. The shock of wonder, as well as the world of play, are not encountered as useful, even though they may continue to be so in a variety of causally specified ways.

Wonder also involves what can be dubbed a complementary movement—one that speaks to the responses generated by wonder’s disruption of the widely accepted systems of meanings. Keen described two kinds of responses, one that “moves *from puzzlement to curiosity to a search for explanation*,” (p. 31) and another that travels “from admiration to contemplation to celebration” (p. 34). The first is a move toward exploration and rationality, the second is a call to consider and cavort. During the former and while puzzlement vanishes there

comes an effort to “dispel the dis-ease” (p. 32). Curiosity makes its appearance to take the form of questions. This questioning, or as Keen put it, this *wonderosity*, is a “rudimentary state of response in which wonder and curiosity exist in a Siamese twinship” (p. 32). It is not only until realizing that satisfactory discoveries and answers are possible that wonder and curiosity depart from each other. “Curiosity, disciplined, becomes reason” (p. 33) and the systematization of questioning becomes scientific investigation. Keen noted however that science does not necessarily “prevent a return to the object in the spirit of wonder” (p. 34).

The second type of responses to wonder is found in the enjoyment and admiration that it produces. This attitude towards what is given involves contemplation—a receptivity to let wonder “create the categories by which it will be understood” (p. 34). In contemplation there is a return to the object of wonder to prolong admiration and in turn there is a celebration of the novel and meaning brought about by the force of wonder.

Keen’s thesis is that there has been a “destruction of *the ecology of wonder*” (p. 93). Traditional or pre-modern human beings are understood as *homo admirans* who accepted life “as a meaningful gift which filled [them] with admiration and gratitude, and responded actively by creating a community in harmony with patterns of meaning and value which [they] believed were homogenized into the cosmos” (p. 61). For *homo admirans* the cosmos was an

ordered system with a comprehensible telos. *Homo admirans* lived in wonder in an inherently meaningful order.

Without explaining definitely how modern human beings have lost the celebration of wonder, Keen offered some theories. Contrary to *homo admirans*—modern human beings—*homo faber* see the world as chaotic, awaiting human discovery, creation, and subjugation. For *homo faber* the cosmos is devoid of meaning, and only technical interventions can create order in nature. That which provides identity is a *logos* bound to control, performance, and manipulation.

Summarizing his views, Keen said that “*homo faber* reflects a hostility toward the givenness of human existence which is merely the reverse side of the refusal to admire, to wonder, and to be grateful” (p. 149). Even leisure, for *homo faber*, “has ceased to mean the opportunity to celebrate or contemplate” (pp. 145-146). In a context dominated by making and trading, play, which is a mutual giving, a dance of generosity and acceptance rather than calculation is impossible (pp. 143-145).

In light of his conclusions, Keen asked himself about the role that wonder might have in what he calls the healthy or authentic life. To accomplish the task Keen analyzed the Apollonian and Dionysian modes of being-in-the-world because they offer radically different alternatives. This exercise might be seen as a contradiction because Keen emphasized throughout his book the value of

wonder. But he warned that “it may be possible to have too much wonder” (p. 152).

The Apollonian way of having the world represents reason, order, and discipline. In this tradition authentic life “consists of learning the rules and boundaries, and distinguishing . . . between the knowable and the unknowable, the possible and the impossible, man and God, I and Thou, mine and yours” (p. 153). The Apollonian way leads to *homo faber*, control over the environment, rationality, and law. Order, action, responsibility, and control of passions dominate the human spirit.

By way of contrast, the Dionysian way of relating to the world “exalts ecstasy over order, the id over the ego, being possessed over a possessive orientation” (p. 154). Authentic life in the Dionysian tradition consists of being continuously open to novelty and change. This way “flirts with madness” (p. 157) and has a model in dance. Wonder is a Dionysian attitude.

For Keen the radicalization of either the Apollonian or the Dionysian modes of being-in-the-world destructs the balance essential to the healthy or authentic life. Extreme Apollonianism conspires “to deny novelty, wonder, and freedom” (p. 167) making life too rigid and dry. On the other side, in extreme Dionysianism “the world is reduced to chaos and absolute contingency” (p. 176). Life is, then, too loose and groundless. Keen’s proposal of the authentic human being is a synthesis of virtues of each tradition because “wonder and ecstasy are of value if they are placed within the context of a well-ordered life” (p. 158).

Authentic life exists, then, in a balance of wonder and action; neither the contemplation of *homo admirans* nor the productivity of *homo faber* are enough to relate effectively or wholly to the complexity of the world. Both securing wonder and domesticating chaos are desirable components of a meaningful life. The model of human being that has this holistic attitude is what Keen termed *homo tempestivus*—the “timely or opportune man, the man for all seasons” (p. 197). *Homo tempestivus* knows when it is important to be prudent, rational, and disciplined or celebrative. The authentic or creative life does not require us to repressively choose between wonder and action. As Keen himself put it: “the creative process is an oscillation between play and work” (p. 195). Everyone needs a touch of madness, but only part of the time.

### **2.2.2 Play and liberation**

An important theme in Jürgen Moltmann’s book *Theology of Play* is that creation is the outcome of a divine playful act. God did not create the world out of coercion, necessity, or overfulness because she is by no means constrained or driven by silly caprices. On the contrary, God is free. As a free creator, God grounds her products in her “*good will or pleasure*. Hence the creation is God’s

play, a play of his groundless and inscrutable wisdom. It is the realm in which God displays his glory” (Moltmann, 1972, p. 17).<sup>10</sup>

Human play has been defined with the same characteristics ascribed to divine play. Both kinds of play are meaningful, done for their own sake, and voluntary. However, Moltmann argued that God’s play is different from that of humankind. God, he said, “plays with his own possibilities and creates out of nothing . . . Man can only play with something which, in turn, is playing with him” (p. 17). Unlike God, human beings “cannot play with nothing or a void” (p. 18). Despite this difference, Deistic and human play have similarities. Both types of play represent freedom, entail joy, utterly absorb the player, and are taken seriously. Probably the strongest connection between Deistic and human play rests in the fact that “the symbol of the world as God’s free creation out of his good pleasure corresponds to the symbol of man as the child of God” (p. 18).

God’s play created the world for her own glory. For Moltmann this has to be interpreted as an invitation for human beings to “rejoice in God’s and his own existence, for this by itself is meaningful enough” (p. 19). Far from theologies that neglect the enjoyment of human life, call for self-control, and require endless sacrifices, Moltmann’s position welcomes the pleasure of play. “The glorification of God lies in the demonstrative joy of existence;” (p. 21) consequently playing is the most appropriate human option on earth—an option that approximates the

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<sup>10</sup> Throughout this chapter whenever I quote Moltmann, it is in reference to his book *Theology of Play*. Therefore, hereafter, when quoting Moltmann I will only provide the specific page citation in the text.

activity of humans to God. In short, God's creation of the world invites human beings to play because it "unites the free God with liberated men" (p. 36).

Play is, then, not only the desirable direction of human being's worldly projects but, more importantly, it constitutes the path for liberation. Moltmann said that "freedom needs more than to be *realized*, it must be celebrated" (p. 23). This is so because freedom is secured in God and consequently the stakes "are not realizations, successes, and accomplishments but the endless beauties and liberties of the finite concomitants of the infinite joy of the creator" (p. 23). The celebration of human being's existence is not to be found in materialistic, achievement-oriented enterprises but in the realm of the joyful non-utilitarian, achievement-free expression of being. Moltmann concluded his point saying that "*following the crucified* liberates men from the laws and powers of this world and sets them free. The *iconoclasm of liberty* directed against the images, taboos, and idols of society changes its conditions" (p. 53). To put it differently, by imitating the play of God, human beings gain freedom, celebrate their existence, unite with God, and modify the conditions that promote blasphemy. By playing human beings leave behind the compulsion to have, achieve, and worship their own abilities and constructions.

In line with his praise of the holiness of play, Moltmann suggested that religion, if human beings are to live their freedom—that is, to play, has to take steps leading from the "*reproduction of the working world* during leisure to the *production of new conditions in leisure*" (p. 69). Religion has to serve the

liberation of human beings by means of proving that it is free and that, much like the play of God and her human creations, it can rejoin that freedom.

Theologians were not the only ones to associate play with the divine. George Sheehan, a cardiologist, writer, and avid runner, saw connections between the play of human beings, which arguably is their mission on earth, and salvation. At play, that is “doing something you would do for nothing,” Sheehan affirmed, “you are on your way to salvation” (Sheehan, 1992, p. 84).<sup>11</sup>

In a world dominated by a Faustian approach to life—one in which control, manipulation, and consumption are prominent goals and signs of success—play is praised as a stress reducer, health promoter, anxiety reliever, and outlet for violent emotions. Regardless of the respectability and acceptability of these prophylactic or therapeutic effects, Sheehan did not consider them the antecedents of play. For him, “the reason for play is to be found in our reason for being,” (p. 87) which carries us to the question of God.

Sheehan believed, following Calvin, that the world is *theatrum Gloria Dei*, a place created by God out of her incommensurable glory for her own glory. Human beings are in this world to glorify God who created her *theatrum* in joy and play. “We are in this world,” Sheehan concluded, “to give glory to God and rejoice in our own and God’s existence. And we do this in play” (p. 87). Little

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<sup>11</sup> Throughout this chapter whenever I quote Sheehan, it is in reference to his article “Playing”. Therefore, hereafter, when quoting Sheehan I will only provide the specific page citation in the text.



wonder, then, that Sheehan, faithful to his convictions proposed to start a new religion whose first commandment is: “play regularly” (p. 85).

Not all theologians agree with Moltmann’s and Sheehan’s theory of God’s play and its corollaries for human play. Robert Neale, for example, accused Moltmann of isolating play from pain, death, suffering, and other worldly evils. In the process, Moltmann constructs a simplistic and romantic vision of play that celebrates laughter and singing. “If play is only a leisure-time activity,” argued Neale, “neither God nor man is interested” (Neale, 1972, p. 77).<sup>12</sup>

Rather than seeing play as a superficial activity, Neale advanced that the spirit of play is best captured by the term *adventure*. An adventure in this context does not require success from the adventurer-player but an attitude of giving oneself up to the surprises and wonders brought by the adventure in order to enjoy them. Adventurous players recognize that the happenings “occur by chance, involve risk, and are striking . . . in nature” (p. 78). The adventurer-player knows that the world is experienced in an unusual mode but is aware that one remains attached to the usual or everyday world. Conscious that one is playing, the adventurer-player trusts “in the value of the adventure for its own sake” (p. 78). When the adventure encompasses in great depth and breadth people’s total existence, they are in front of the holy.

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<sup>12</sup> Throughout this chapter whenever I quote Neale, it is in reference to his article “The Crucifixion of Play”. Therefore, hereafter, when quoting Neale I will only provide the specific page citation in the text.

Neale said that confronted with the holy “like Moses before the burning bush, we would take off our shoes and kneel on holy ground; and, like David before the ark of God, we would kick up our heels with delight” (p. 80). In short, human responses to the most profound adventurous play—the holy, would be one of amazement, humility, and rejoicing. These types of experience are possible “because they first happened to God himself” (p. 80).

For Neale, God “is capable of being surprised” and by virtue of this ability God “enable[s] us to be capable of being surprised on occasion” (p. 81). Here resides the crux of Neale’s disagreement with Moltmann and Sheehan. If the spirit of play is realized in the amazement and striking nature of an adventure, risk and even “suffering becomes an occasion for wonder and delight” (p. 83). Pain is not eliminated. Paraphrasing Neale, the enemy of play is not suffering, pain, or death but work. Human beings’ “only hope lies in the fact that God does not [work]” (p. 85). Once again, the message is: Play!

The proposed elevation of play into a theology of holy play has not been accepted in all corners of Christianity. For traditional theologians such as Robert Higgs, those who believe in holy play have “cheapened the idea of the holy by associating it with the cosmic dance without seeking a vision of the One” (Higgs, 1992, p. 101).<sup>13</sup> The holy play advocates, Higgs continued, have misinterpreted the role of the body “implying that play . . . is the route to the holy” (p. 101). In

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<sup>13</sup> Throughout this chapter whenever I quote Higgs, it is in reference to his article “Muscular Christianity, Holy Play, and Spiritual Exercises: Confusion about Christ in Sport and Religion”. Therefore, hereafter when quoting Higgs I will only provide the specific page citation in the text.

short, the avenue to salvation is not to be found in a playful attitude but in the well-established ideals of quietude and denial.

Higgs criticized the theologians of play saying that in their notion of play, God (instead of being seen as transcendent) is seen as immanent. To say it differently, at play God can be experienced because she “is in the world rather than above it” (p. 92). However, Higgs believed that the holy, “the mystical state is both experience *and* vision” (p. 90). Play does not lead to the mystical vision.

The crux of Higgs’ argument resides in his distinction between the nature of the holy and play. The latter belongs to the natural and is a pleasure that relaxes, pleases, and reassures. On the other hand, the holy is “supernatural, transcendent, mysterious, awful, wholly other;” (p. 94) it “disturbs, unsettles, strikes down, lifts up, and transforms” (p. 95). Clearly, the holy and play do not go hand in hand.

The incompatibility of the holy and play demonstrates for Higgs the limitations of play as a way to experience, know, and envision God. Higgs even conceded that God may play, “but play may not necessarily be the way to know him” (p. 98). On the contrary, old ideals such as worship, denial, meditation, sacrifice, and study may be the safest ways to access the glory of God. Higgs did not deny the pleasure of human play; however, he put it in what he considered its right place in relation to the joy brought about by the holy. He said that “the most that play can do is to make the world bearable” (p. 101). To

access the divine, humans need to rise to the sphere of the spiritual. Dance or laughter cannot transport humanity to that wholly other destination.

James Carse's book *Finite and Infinite Games* deals with the realm of the spiritual in an original way. As the title of the book suggests life, for Carse, offers two kinds of games. These two species—finite and infinite games—are quite different from one another; they serve distinct functions and possibly each one corresponds to divergent worldviews. Being a finite or an infinite game player tells a lot about how a human being approaches the world and lives her life projects.

A finite game is externally defined; it has both a precise beginning and end. The limits, spatial and temporal, of finite games are constructed so that players can partake in it. As Carse put it, "*the rules of a finite game are the contractual terms by which the players can agree who has won*" (Carse, 1986, p. 8).<sup>14</sup> The validity of the rules is granted by the agreement, either explicit or implicit, of the players. "Finite players play within boundaries" (p. 10) that establish what is allowed and what is prohibited in order to win during play. Finite games have an outcome, an end point; indeed they exist to be completed—to win.

On the other hand, an infinite game, unlike its finite counterpart, is not bounded by externally imposed boundaries. Being internally defined, an infinite

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<sup>14</sup> Throughout this chapter whenever I quote Carse, it is in reference to his book *Finite and Infinite Games*. Therefore, hereafter, when quoting Carse I will only provide the specific page citation in the text.

game's space and time are created within its own sphere. Boundaries are shaped and reshaped in each move; alternative worlds and times are constantly created in infinite games. Because the purpose of this kind of game is to continue playing, "*the rules of an infinite game must change in the course of play*" (p. 9) to prevent play coming to an end. Boundaries are established and reestablished in infinite games just to prevent the extinction of play. In other words, "infinite players play with boundaries" (p. 10).

Besides the sharp contrast between finite and infinite games, Carse said that they are identical in only one respect: "it is an invariable principle of all play, finite and infinite, that whoever plays, plays freely. Whoever *must* play, cannot *play*" (p4). In addition, Carse explained that a finite game can occur within an infinite game but that the opposite is not possible.

Infinite players embrace finite games knowing that this typology of games contains a "substitution of a part of the whole for the whole" (p. 14). Therefore, infinite players unlike their finite counterparts, take finite games up playfully. "We are playful," Carse continued, "when we engage others at the level of choice, when there is no telling in advance where our relationship with them will come out—when, in fact, no one has an outcome to be imposed on the relationship, apart from the decision to continue it" (p. 15). Finite players are serious; they take the part for the whole, press for specific conclusions, and do not welcome the unpredictability of open possibilities.

Kinds of playfulness are related and derived from our freedom to choose between abstract and concrete roles. For Carse, “seriousness is always related to roles, or abstractions” (p. 15). To the extent that a finite game requires a closure and taking up roles, Carse referred to “finite play as *theatrical*” (p. 16). On the contrary, because infinite players keep the opening of possibilities at issue and further the game, he referred to “infinite play as *dramatic*” (p. 16). Theatrically or in abstractness, for example, a person chooses to take on the role of a teacher; dramatically or in concreteness, as a whole, a person chooses to be a teacher.

It is precisely the dynamic nature of humanity that is irreconcilable with the serious, theatrical, and fixed characteristics of finite play. More than representing roles and closing what the world has to offer, hence living a superficial life, the task of humans is to “become a people in passage . . . [that] make use of laughter, vision, and surprise” (p. 62). Summarizing his thesis Carse affirmed that “infinite players are not serious actors in any story, but the joyful poets of a story that continues to originate what they cannot finish,” to conclude that “there is but one infinite game” (p. 149).

Clearly, the only infinite game Carse talked about is called life. Little wonder, then, that for him infinite players are those who do not fall in the temptation to merely achieve, control, accumulate, and confine. Carse’s infinite players are the only true ones because, as genuinely dramatic they constantly alter from within to make life and the world pregnant with possibilities and

provocative tension. That, for Carse, is being playful. Whatever stops infinite players from playing infinite games is, in a sense, evil because that hampers the elevation to the spiritual. For Carse, it is precisely in the enjoyment of the journey proposed by infinite play that the spiritual resides.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Critique of literature**

The goal in this chapter is to critically evaluate the philosophical accounts of play reviewed in the previous chapter. In pursuing this end, I examine the limitations of efforts made both to characterize play and identify its normative qualities. The purpose is not to dismiss the utility of those analyses altogether, but to suggest that they are, for a variety of reasons, incomplete or otherwise insufficient. The chapter reveals that a comprehensive understanding of play requires a full appreciation of the experiential features of its immediate encounter.

Consequently, this chapter is an important complement to the review of literature and lays a foundation for the forthcoming analysis of play. The chapter is divided into two sections devoted to definitional and normative analyses of play respectively. During this critique, fruitful directions for revising and deepening the way play is understood will be disclosed.

#### **3.1 Limitations of definitional analyses of play**

The definitional analyses of play reviewed in chapter 2 aim primarily at establishing the nature of play. These studies propose a variety of defining



features and analyze their relationship to the structure of games. In addition, they tend to investigate play without fully considering its lived experience as a fundamental source of investigation. Yet some analysts attempt to inform their search for the nature of play by describing some aspects of the phenomenon. Their focus on identifying necessary and sufficient conditions for play prompts them in a direction that departs from lived experience and brings about two sets of problems. The first set is what I call *the problem of abstraction*, which carries three interrelated concerns: *the loss of details*, *the embracing of contraries*, and *the loss of magic and the mirage of stability*. The second set is what I call *the problem of excessive exteriority*.

### **3.1.1 The problem of abstraction**

In issues such as play, abstraction, which here means a process of generalizing in order to construct and formalize discrete structures, contributes to but also constrains the understanding of the phenomenon at hand. In this sense, definitional endeavors that attempt to set the boundaries of play by generalizing and reifying the way people actually play, objectify, simplify, and do not give appropriate recognition to people's intimate contact with the phenomenon.

Efforts to demarcate and distinguish play as a formal category are critical in helping to understand this reality. However, if those analytical efforts are not fully grounded in the fleshy and messy experiences of play they distort that

experience by reducing it to categories and logical relationships. Approaching play in terms of general characteristics apart from specific instantiations does not give a full account of the wide lived spectrum of play. The content and quality of play consciousness varies from person to person, from event to event, even from moment to moment. This can range from the meaningful to the shallow and from captivating to uninteresting modes of play.

To appreciate this wide range of play experiences, I invite the reader to consider, for example, my routine of climbing up any flight of stairs by leaping over two or three or more steps at a time and the long afternoons spent in improvised football pitches. These activities differ markedly. The first one is a pleasant event characterized by ephemeral attention and interest while the second one is lived as a project full of poignancy, gratification, and internal values. Neither my football involvement nor my particular way of climbing up stairs are done for extrinsic or utilitarian purposes. I do not want to become an accomplished stair-climber nor do I hope to rise to football's global stardom. I simply undertake these activities for intrinsic purposes. On this basis, and assuming that the period devoted to football and leaping stairs manifests a reallocation of time thought to have higher life priorities, both activities correspond to characterizations identified by Huizinga, Fink, and Suits reviewed in the previous chapter. Both activities constitute legitimate occurrences of play. However, these authors' logical categories do not give a full hearing to the

different textures found in my two highly distinctive experiences of play. In an important sense their abstractions miss my meaningful lived distinctions.

Abstract categories can be, of course, extrapolations from lived encounters of one sort or another. Huizinga (1955) , for example, started off his intellectual excursion affirming that his task is to deal “with the question of what play is *in itself* and what it means for the player” (p. 2).<sup>15</sup> Consistent with the latter Fink (1979) said that in studying play “our experience is all the evidence we need. Each of us has been a player” (p. 74).<sup>16</sup> Huizinga’s and Fink’s objectification of play as a self-contained enterprise which does not respond to external demands and is different from ordinary life can be interpreted as echoing players’ subjective experiences. Although Suits did not explicitly state an interest in play’s lived meanings, his categorization of play as autotelic behavior involving a reallocation of resources more commonly devoted to important purposes can also be read as reflecting lived experiences. In this sense, even when Huizinga and Fink did not fully carry out the task of exploring the meaning of play, neither theirs nor Suits’ formal categorizations are irrelevant or unhelpful.

The claim here is that reducing lived experiences of play to a set of essential characteristics denotes a process of abstraction that homogenizes play and misses important details. From the likes of Huizinga, Fink, and Suits, the

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<sup>15</sup> Throughout this chapter whenever I quote Huizinga, it is in reference to his book *Homo Ludens*. Therefore, hereafter, when quoting Huizinga I will only provide the specific page citation in the text.

<sup>16</sup> Throughout this chapter whenever I quote Fink, it is in reference to his article “The Ontology of Play.” Therefore, hereafter, when quoting Fink I will only provide the specific page citation in the text.

experiences in stairs and football pitches mentioned above constitute instances of play. Both, more or less, show features of voluntary engagement, autotelicity, and reallocation of resources. But they are not entirely alike! My residence in stairs and football pitches greatly varies in richness, magnetism, and meaning but these immediately apprehended differences are not fully honored by the generality of objective structures. In reducing the experience of play to an identifiable category, the unique relationships players establish with playgrounds are, at best, analyzed only superficially.

#### **3.1.1.1 The loss of details**

One of the consequences of seeing play through the lenses of abstracted categories is that there is a *loss of details* in the account of the world of play. There are a variety of lived experiences that reflect the formal characteristics of play rendered by Huizinga, Fink, and Suits. However, these definitional efforts are unable to detail different qualities and values of the immediate encounters of play. They stop at distinguishing play from other things. What are lived experiences of voluntary allegiance to reallocate to intrinsic and non-utilitarian activities resources committed to productive endeavors like? How does my listless rendezvous with stairs differ from my vibrant commitment to pursue the internal values only provided by football? These questions cannot be fully addressed by the rigidity of discrete categories. The latter needs to be

substantiated with a richer and more detailed discussion of the diverse ways in which the world is intended while we are at play.

Huizinga tried to accommodate experiential distinctions in his definition of play by asserting that fun is the “element that characterizes the essence of play” (p. 3). Decidedly, fun constitutes an experiential tendency. In another attempt to find better descriptions of play he said that it “creates a second, poetic world alongside the world of nature” (p. 4). Both the fun and poetry vary in content and intensity. Fink, who was also preoccupied with general differences within play, advanced that “each type of play, as far as we can see, establishes a certain meaning” (p. 78). Again meaning varies from person to person. However, these efforts to distinguish different species of play do not suffice. Let me exemplify how these concepts do not produce substantial differences and continue to portray play as uniform.

As player, for example, I intend stairs and steps as reallocated. I might occasionally intend stairs, for instance, as tall mountains or ancient and sharp angled Egyptians pyramids waiting to be cleared. Now I am in a world of play at the stairs that leads to my apartment, which is experienced as the vehicle for mountainous or ancient adventures. On the other hand, when I am in the world of play at the football pitch I intend it in a different way. Here time is reallocated, for I make myself available so the seductive invitations of football choose and capture me. In the world of stairs and steps I experience myself more as a chooser but in the world of football I experience myself more as chosen.

As implied above, stairs and football pitches are for me sources of fun and meaning but the magnitude of these elements provided by the respective worlds of stairs and football is by no means the same. The presence, degree and impact of fun and meaning sharply vary whether the invitation comes from stairs or football grounds, not to mention equally dramatic variations of value. Thus, while Huizinga's and Fink's emphasis on fun and meaning is commendable, their lack of minute examination of the manner in which fun and meaning unfold in the lived world of play render these addendums only partially useful. It is not clear how much fun or meaning is needed to differentiate dreary or shallow from motivating or robust varieties of play. Also, Fink did not provide any indication of the kinds of meanings that each type of play establishes. Without looking from inside the world of play, for example, exploring how stairs get transformed into and perceived as mountains or pyramids, all meanings look alike. The same applies to Huizinga's secondary and poetic worlds created by play. From outside different poetic worlds lose their unique textures, shapes, and flavors. Players know this is not true. Different worlds of play resonate with different pitches; they are neither flat nor vitally equal.

### **3.1.1.2 The embracing of contraries**

The utility of logical categories such as autotelicity and exotelicity prove limited when faced with the *issue of embracing contraries in the lived*

*experiences of play*. The same can be said about the reallocation of resources. The process of abstraction and its consequent loss of detail produce an amalgamation of characteristics that portrays play as a static entity that rules out any possibility of unifying logical contraries. If a person is involved in an activity that meets the requirements of the definition of play, she enters this special territory. Consequently, when a person loses one of those defining features, the lusive territory is suddenly left behind. As abstractions, these features are a poor fit for the varied ways people experience play. Play embraces contraries, for in its delight people seem to move away from and pass over logical opposites. Huizinga and Fink recognized the constraints of some widely accepted mutually exclusive categorizations through which play has been defined and valued such as the play-work or frivolity-seriousness pairs. Their analyses are revealing and provide a path to see how theirs and Suits' categories are subject to similar comments.

Fink, for instance, stated in relation to seeing play in the shadow of any other phenomenon that "as long as we accept such implications, 'play and work,' 'play and the realities of life,' play cannot be thought of in its proper sense" (p. 75). Along the same lines Huizinga affirmed that rather than being opposites, "play turns to seriousness and seriousness to play" (p. 8). The merit of these observations is to deny the puritanical assumption that play is frivolous or a trivial aspect of human life. Huizinga and Fink take play seriously and place it at the center of human experience. In stressing the relevance of play they also

highlight its complexity and elusive character. Play is a difficult phenomenon to grasp, one that is easily misunderstood if simply opposed to other aspects of life. As Fink put it, “play can embrace the most striking contraries” (p. 77). However, Suits (1988) claimed that play is a concept that gains sense in relation to a contrasting background (pp. 20-24). For him, play involves a reallocation of resources usually used for higher duties. When Fink said that the duality reality-illusion belongs to the very nature of play (p. 79) and Huizinga described play as extraordinary (p. 13), they seem to agree with Suits that play is an inherently relational concept.

Whether or not Huizinga and Fink contradict their own initial resistance to oppose play to other phenomena by agreeing with Suits’ explicit claim that play is a contextual concept, the autotelic-exotelic category, even when complemented with the reallocation move, does not fully account for “the [always fluid] contrast between play and seriousness” (Huizinga, 1955, p. 8) and the lived experiences of play “which drastically mixes contraries” (Fink, 1979, p. 77). If autotelicity stands in logical opposition to exotelicity, this pair does not appear to be much more flexible than the play-work or frivolity-seriousness dichotomies.

However, people do not live through their life engagements in such a dramatic clear-cut dichotomization. On the contrary, people’s relationship with the world is so messy that the experience of play is extremely dynamic. If the logical distinctions used to understand play were to be applied, once a project is intended with zealous earnest, such as finishing a college term paper with the



hope of receiving the highest possible mark or mowing the lawn of a recently moved neighbor out of kindness, it cannot, in principle, be transformed into an endeavor whose rewards reside only within itself. A project is either taken up for its own sake or for the pursuit of external or productive values. Using Suits' terminology, activities from which we expect an instrumental payoff remain so until they are finished. In one sense, this is true. However, play defies such cold categorization and requires flexible characterizations modified by the nuances of lived experience.

I offer the following scenario for consideration. Each semester, the last Friday before instruction begins, the head of the Department of Kinesiology makes me responsible for the final registration of all our undergraduate courses. My involvement in the activity is entirely provoked by a sense of duty to the Department of Kinesiology. I do not enjoy doing the final registration, for it involves only a boring and tedious collection, comparison, and compilation of data. Usually, I go through the motions fondly anticipating my Friday afternoon group hike and the promise of serendipitous occurrences. But something goes wrong with the registration system and all of a sudden substantial challenges arise. I rearrange the data, try different mathematical formulas, and implement statistical methods that I have not used for years. Without looking for it I am captured by the need to find creative solutions, and the feelings of mastery and excitement. The dull final registration turns into an inherently interesting and satisfying project. When I look up at the clock I realize that my hiking group

might already be well into the nearby hills. I do not regret it, for my submersion in the unexpected problems of final registration reminded me of the joy and delightful uncertainty I get from hiking.

The experience of flip-flopping between lived instances of autotelicity and exotelicity is not an uncommon one. Play is so unpredictable that it can appear in the least expected places. But it can also desert us when we thought its presence was a given. From an objective point of view the final registration episode does not constitute an instance of play because it is a form of duty and an instrumental activity with few redeeming qualities. From a subjective point of view, however, an important portion of this particular final registration was lived through in an autotelic spirit. It felt so good that all extrinsic benefits were momentarily removed from my attention. The delight was so powerful that time flew and the intrinsically valued event of hiking was forgotten. What an irony! . . . Time was reallocated from an autotelic activity (hiking) to an a priori exotelic one (final registration). These considerations confirm that “the move to autotelicity is a prerational (i.e. non-utilitarian) decision, a conscious or unconscious choice to accept an invitation!” (Kretchmar, 1992, p. 5).<sup>17</sup> This move, then, embraces what from an objective point of view appears as contraries. Experientially, it does not matter whether the play invitations come from our working bench, office desk, dusty baseball diamond, or playroom. What really counts for the player is that an objectively defined exotelic project is absorbed into and lived as an autotelic one.

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<sup>17</sup> Throughout this chapter I quote two works by Kretchmar. Therefore, hereafter, when quoting Kretchmar I will provide the specific year and page citation in the texts.

In those instances play invitations are accepted without rational calculation or cost-benefit analysis; players take up or are taken by that invitation.

Externally defined autotelic or exotelic endeavors can be transformed to and lived as its logical counterpoint. I have fallen out of the autotelic mood while playing football but, even though the experience had turned sour, I remained on the pitch not to disappoint my teammates, to get some exercise, or to impress the younger players. On the other hand, focusing on what pay off comes after involvement in an event does not per se preclude the experience of autotelicity. I believe that some professional athletes can testify affirmatively in this regard. Some seemingly exotelic activities provide a better terrain for valuing the doing itself and capturing intrinsic values than do many shallow and uninteresting autotelic projects. I wonder if spending an *autotelic* afternoon in a theme park would be for me more valuable in terms of sustaining lived intrinsic ends and meanings than my originally *exotelic* experience of final registration.

The bottom line here is that autotelicity and exotelicity as abstract categories are a poor match for the experiential variations we encounter in different playgrounds. Our dwelling in the world is extremely complex. Sometimes, this complexity allows for engagements that seem to embrace contradictions. Play does not escape this possibility. Abstract categories of play require complementation by our intimate contact with the world while at play so as to reflect the lived embracing of dissimilars. Play can be experienced in non-play environments . . . or vice versa and the quality of play can vary dramatically.

### 3.1.1.3 The loss of magic and the mirage of stability

The problem of abstraction in definitional analyses of play has two more interrelated disadvantages that deserve mention. The first is the *loss of magic of the lived experience of play*; the second is what I call the *mirage of stability*. The characterization of play as an involvement with the world whose reward and values reside in itself prompts one to consider it as an exceptional realm for fostering human potential. Huizinga said in relation to this exceptionality that “we find play present everywhere as a well-defined quality of action which is different from ‘ordinary’ life” (p. 4). Along the same lines Fink stressed the power of play to create special realities within the ordinariness of everyday life at both individual and communal levels. However, neither of these authors fully explored their proposed extraordinariness of play, its secrecy, and enchantment. To an important degree the intricate fabric of play was left untouched.

What Huizinga and Fink had in mind is a useful but limited distinction between the typical pragmatic means-ends orientation to life and the curious gratuitous logic of play. They emphasize that play’s secludedness is intimately connected with its disinterestedness. That is, independent of the ordinary necessities of life, play is a self-sufficient realm of life that only has “internal finalities which do not transcend it” (Fink, 1979, p. 77) and is done for the sake of the experience it provides. However, what happens during play, which stands over and above efficiency and rational calculation, is not one of Huizinga’s or Fink’s main concerns. Consequently, distinctions within play are not observed

and, more importantly, the most powerful experiences of play, those that have the greater impact on players, are leveled with more pedestrian instances of play. All play is simply labeled as extraordinary. As I have been suggesting, however, there are modes of play that range from the tedious to the fascinating.

The magic of the lived experience of some forms of play is lost when analyzed under categories whose primary intention is to draw a line between consequential or functional and useless or intrinsically meaningful ways of intending the world. I can recall instances in the football pitch in which my feet have explored and traversed football spaces where I have never stepped before. The routings that emerged were the result of an acute conversation between my possibilities and the world of football. In those moments I felt that the skills and tricks of the game came to me in a fluid and intoxicating way. I simply communed with football and unfolded my football being in a superior dimension. I only wish I could recreate those extraordinary experiences at will.

I can also recollect other extraordinary experiences. I remember some visits to the movie theater during lunch hour in order to watch films by one of my favorite filmmakers. Of course, the movies were longer than the time allocated for lunch, but I trusted that no one would notice my absence from the workplace. I embarrassingly admit that on more than one occasion I could barely remain in my seat. Either the movie was poor or I was preoccupied with some unfinished work. If I remained through the whole movie, it was only to show that I had not thrown away my money. By many formal accounts of play I was enjoying the

beauty of an extraordinary event. However, these lunchtime, uncoerced, autotelic reallocations of time proved sterile, and were not able to generate the sort of exquisite engagements with the world that, for example, the football episodes described above offered. Abstract categories tend to reduce play's extraordinariness to a superficial description of what the player goes through while at play. They lack the capacity to account for ecstatic forms of play and fail to describe its full mystery and tension.

In addition to misinforming play by missing meaningful dimensions of people's autotelic associations with the world, definitional analyses of play fix the phenomenon and provide it with an image of stability. People are at play, according to formal accounts, if the approach to the activity they are engaged in involves an autotelic reallocation of resources. This either-or approach is significantly constrictive, for play is not a simple phenomenon that can be easily determined and localized from an objective point of view. Broad abstractions provide a degree of stability at the expense of some qualitative aspects of play. The experience of play speaks to a complex set of changing relationships between players and playgrounds. Definitional inquiries into play portray it as fixed and are too rigid to show how these two poles reciprocally affect each other.

Players and playgrounds are not static entities that come into contact with one another to produce play. Playgrounds change players and conversely, players affect playgrounds. I have previously confessed that my voluntary

association with football has brought me both inspiring instances of football freedom and rightness as well as monotonous repetitions of skills and predictable disassociations with the football world. Most of the time football has been a delight for me, but on some occasions it has not had its usual pull. Emotions, duties, preoccupations, friendships, levels of skill and fitness, weather and playground conditions are some of the factors that influence the way people play if indeed they are to play at all. It is only from an oversimplification of the phenomenon of play that all of my experiences in football pitches could be deemed as stable play. When philosophers look only for broad, general characterizations of play some omissions and distortions occur. A mirage of stability can be one of them.

If a complete picture of the complexity of play is to be provided, abstract thinking has to be complemented with descriptions of the poorness and worthlessness as well as the richness and fullness of pre-reflective play. Players' potentials to engage in playgrounds evolve constantly. The other side of the play coin is that playgrounds offer a multitude of changing opportunities. Imagine how diverse and promising the interpenetrations between these two always changing poles are. The interplay between players and playgrounds resists the kind of reification and transparency made possible by appealing to abstract ways of dealing with human enterprises. In other words, the description of play as stable is won at the expense of detail, complexity, and variation. The challenge is to inform abstractions of play by returning to the originality of the lived experience

while realizing that much of the stability gained can be distortive and should be regarded as provisional. The fluidity, co-determination, and tension between players and playgrounds requires that we attend more closely to the concrete phenomenon of play rather than overlooking it in favor of abstractions.

### **3.1.2 The problem of excessive exteriority**

I have shown that definitional analyses of play face the limitations of the abstractness of reflective investigation and its distortive consequences. Reducing play to a set of discrete elements not only shows an insufficient correlation between the ways in which players live play and the proposed definitions; it also reveals a trend to centralize the analysis on either activities or environments as sites that favor the appearance of play. These sites are rendered as possessing a collection of surface properties that ignite and secure play. Profiling these properties takes, for example, much of Huizinga's and Fink's efforts and makes their work ambivalent because, despite their explicit goals to explore the meaning of play for the player, they remain largely in the exterior dimension of the experience of play. In what follows, I will demonstrate how definitional analyses of play emphasize environmental characteristics and games' configuration as objective structures to the detriment of more coherent, subjective accounts of play.



Definitional analyses of play implicitly recognize that play involves two poles: a playground offering invitations and a player who accepts them. However, these types of inquiries homogenize the experience of play and reduce its variations to sharply defined features. As a consequence of this process of abstraction, playgrounds are conferred with the ability to determine the appearance of play's features. If environments have certain characteristics, play will follow. In this respect Huizinga claimed that rules "are a very important factor in the play-concept" (p. 11). Indeed, for him, "all play has its rules" (p. 11). Similarly, Fink said that rules are an essential element in play and that "the act of being bound to a pre-established rule is often a positive experience with its own delights" (p. 78). This is a clear indication of the supremacy of the materiality of playgrounds. Fink moved on to affirm that "it [play] is not entirely free. There is no play without a commitment [to the rule] agreed upon and accepted" (p. 78). For these authors sets of rules are necessary, albeit not sufficient, to delimit the secludedness and secrecy of play, making the distinction between reality and illusion possible. Therefore, "as soon as the rules are transgressed the whole play-world collapses" (Huizinga, 1955, p. 11).

I am not convinced that play is established through a commitment to respect rules that would invite one into a different reality. Abiding by a set of rules does not necessarily guarantee the singular joy arising from rich forms of play. I suggest that the reader consider, once again, my involvement with football. Whether it was in the highly structured settings of intramural

tournaments or in an improvised pitch on my neighborhood street, my football experiences have been both delightful and shallow. More importantly, in many occasions play has not proceeded for me “according to fixed rules and on an orderly manner” (Huizinga, 1955, p. 13). I have felt the power of play, for example, while cavorting with a football in the middle of a deserted football pitch or experimenting moves in a swimming pool. In these cases, while I was constrained by the *rules*, better to say the laws, of physics and hydrodynamics, I do not think that these are the rules that Huizinga and Fink had in mind. Play showed up without game-like rules. The claim that rules strongly advantage some environments oversimplifies the lived genealogy of play.

In relation to play, rules also present another problem. From an experiential point of view, objective regulations, in themselves, seem too weak to foster the appearance of play. Play possibilities are possibilities for players not because of objectified rules but, in part, because of subjectified rules. In other words, rules become personally meaningful if players incorporate and live them toward playgrounds rather than keeping them in mind as discrete structures. And when this happens, rules sink into the special way in which players inhabit playgrounds. Whether rules are accepted consciously or unconsciously, the matter is that players live rules as facilitators whose objective presence vanishes as the experience of play takes over. In fact, lived instances of play are commonly interrupted or stopped when rules are objectified. In a sense, the

subjective experience of play supersedes rules' discrete structure. At play, players incorporate rules to forget them.

Rules are not the only critical properties of playground surfaces emphasized by Huizinga and Fink. Fink, for instance, believed that play requires equipment and a social manifestation. Fink said that "to play is to play together, to play with others . . . Play is not, as far as its structure is concerned, an individual and isolated action; it is open to our neighbor as partner" (p. 78). Huizinga also stressed the notion of play-community as a byproduct of people sharing a common playground (p. 12). Probably, those requirements are related to the prominent role that he gave to imagination and representation as natural components of play. The world of play is, for Fink, "a creation through the medium of pleasure of a world of imaginary activity" (p. 80). There is no doubt that in the ordinary world of necessity and survival, illusion is not publicized and the secludedness of play is seen as suspicious. In this sense, play equipment and social interaction might enhance the transformation of the tedium of everyday life but this is not enough to establish that they are necessary conditions for play to happen. The sort of being apart that Fink and Huizinga claimed for play does not need any paraphernalia or equipment. The emergence of play's diverse interior textures is logically independent of specific sets of rules, playthings, or playmates. Definitional analyses of play remain at the surface by placing too little importance on how potential playgrounds and their features (that is objective rules, limitations, play equipment, playmates) are engaged.

For example, Huizinga emphasized two types of activities that make excellent playgrounds and offer poignant invitations to play: “those that offer the provocative challenges of contests and those that supply the interesting tests of representing something” (Kretchmar, 1992, p. 6). For Huizinga, competitive games and rituals constitute instances of play par excellence. In fact they can be combined “in such a way that the game ‘represents’ a contest, or else becomes a contest for the best representation of something” (Huizinga, 1955, p. 13). Fink, much like Huizinga, referred to games, rituals, and festivals as play wellsprings (pp. 78 and 80-81). Caillois, who was not satisfied with the classification coined by the latter, expanded it to four categories (*agon*, *alea*, *mimicry*, and *ilinx*) and opened play to domains largely unexplored. In this sense, Caillois also admitted that play is found in activities whose primary purpose is linked to material productivity, interests, and gains.

However, Caillois’ study reiterated the limitations of Huizinga’s and Fink’s accounts of play. Caillois emphasized regulative conventions and circumscriptions rather than the way those limitations are encountered, transformed, and lived. More importantly, even though Caillois was fascinated with games, he did not explore reasons for the close association of games with play or its archetypical invitations to make play happen. It is Suits’ enlightening and comprehensive theory of games that fills in the gap and helps us appreciate the potential games carry as play promoters. The internal logic of games facilitates the perception that they represent a realm secluded from quotidian life.

But one should be careful when making hasty connections between autotelicity and games. Although the latter will always require accepting and appreciating the relation means-ends for their own sake, following this intrinsically valued logic does not necessarily mean that people are autotelically oriented when involved in games. Play and games, for Suits, are autonomous phenomena that may overlap.

The conditions of playgrounds and the structure of games when analyzed in terms of objective characteristics do not explain the proposed extraordinariness of play, its secrecy, and enchantment. These non-experiential accounts of the world do not tell us how the world appears when human beings play. Play is to be found not so much in claims about the exterior conditions of activities but in the interplay of the textures apprehended in the world when people actively engage in and experience any activity. Games have a great potential to call players and induce play. However, games' internal finality has to be explored in terms of the relished meaning they bring about when players connect and accept that gratuitous logic, that is, their potent call.

### **3.2 Limitations of normative analyses of play**

The normative analyses of play reviewed in the previous chapter attempt to avoid the fragmentation to which play is subjected by definitional analyses. The focus of the former is not simply to determine the nature of play but to

distinguish qualitative differences in lived instances of the phenomenon. While noticing these distinctions, normative analyses of play also discriminate superior from inferior modes of play, and support the former. These efforts to appreciate and value play neither as a homogeneous nor as a normatively innocuous reality are helpful. Yet, despite their efforts to inform or depart from abstract conceptions of play that see it as the convergence of two objective units, that is, the player and the playground, normative analyses of play also raise new issues. These are what I call *the problem of imbalanced analyses of player and playground* and *the problem of the absence of player-playground interpenetration*. To these interrelated concerns I now turn my attention.

### **3.2.1 The problem of imbalanced analyses of player and playground**

Normative analyses of play emphasize that this phenomenon requires two poles: an inviting playground and a consenting player. However, these theories find it most difficult to balance the attention devoted to the attitudinal side or the environmental side, that is, the player and the playground respectively. The emphasis swings either in one direction or another. Kretchmar exemplifies this way of approaching play. He accepted “the proposition that the decision to play is grounded in two moments—1) a human disposition to play, and 2) a sufficiently persuasive play invitation from the world” (1992, p. 5). Nonetheless, he almost exclusively concentrated on the latter.

Kretchmar established that the first moment of play is active while the second one is passive. The former is subjective and belongs to the player while the latter is objective and represents the playground. Kretchmar's recognition that play is the product of two different poles is extremely important in demonstrating that neither the player nor the playground by itself is sufficient for play to occur. To support the notion that play necessarily involves both moments Kretchmar appealed to experiential verification. On the one hand, he said that "anyone who has tried unduly to force play knows that it cannot be done" (1992, p. 5). On the other hand, "The most potent play environment in the world is rendered sterile if we are indifferent, bothered, preoccupied, fearful, or otherwise indisposed" (1992, p. 6). These affirmations seem to correspond to my own lived play encounters.

Kretchmar's approach to play as a dynamic process involving an available and predisposed player, and a colorful and provocative playground allows him "to separate, as it were, play from play" (1992, p. 3) and raises the possibility that different modes of play encompass a broad range of normative import. For him, qualitative distinctions are needed to identify the most desirable play experiences. Kretchmar started his search for those distinctions with play's passive moment, that is, the invitations offered by playgrounds, because it "has generated the best developed maps of the play landscape" (1992, p. 6). His two varieties of play—acquisitive and celebrative—are grounded in species of invitations coming from playgrounds. Respectively, they manifest first, the

attraction of tests and second, the call for people to express themselves.

Kretchmar speculates that both varieties of play enjoy a comparable normative status. However, within these species of play two modes of play exist that differ in value. Kretchmar called them the narrative and aesthetic modes. For him, the former is superior because it provides meaningful and durable conditions under which human beings can unfold and write coherent life stories. Unlike narrative play, aesthetic play has a short life and transforms people into ludic nomads who are always “looking for excitement, enjoyment, anything of interest” (1992, pp. 11-12).

In contemporary Western culture many, if not a majority, disagree with Kretchmar and believe that aesthetic play is the superior species. The strength of his analysis resides in challenging this widely accepted notion while considering playgrounds as much more than sites for novel or sensually appealing experiences. In the process of studying the passive moment of play Kretchmar also clarifies and completes Caillois' categorization of play invitations. With his contribution the topography of playgrounds is detailed and accurate.

However, Kretchmar's detailed charting of the features of the passive moment of play is achieved at the expense of the active moment. In his fascination with playgrounds, he hardly touches upon the latter moment of play leaving an imbalanced analysis of the two necessary moments of this phenomenon. Due to his overemphasis on the objective side of play, Kretchmar



relegates the subjective dimension to a position of lower importance. In doing so he also reveals a tendency to logically categorize aspects of play.

Kretchmar is not the only one who has problems putting the uniqueness of playgrounds' invitations and the attitude people take while opening and considering them in a balanced perspective. If he errs on the side of playgrounds' allure, others have difficulty getting over the player's predisposition. Hyland and Esposito are cases in point. In their reluctance to objectify the phenomenon of play, they focus on the attitude or orientation of the player. In this regard, Esposito (1995) clearly stated that he wants to overcome the fact "that not enough attention has been given to the players' point of view" (p. 114).<sup>18</sup> Similarly, Hyland centered his investigation on the stance of play, which is "a certain orientation toward those with whom we play, toward our play equipment, toward time, space, indeed toward the world" (1984, p. 45).<sup>19</sup>

As seen in the previous chapter, Hyland's stance of play translates into a viewpoint that combines being aware of and responsive to what happens in the surroundings. Hyland believes that the stance of play involves, then, two distinctive active moments: openness and responsiveness. He called the structure of the stance of play simply responsive openness. For Esposito, play refers to and is characterized by acutely felt experiences of possibility. He

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<sup>18</sup> Throughout this chapter whenever I quote Esposito, it is in reference to his article "Play and Possibility". Therefore, hereafter, when quoting Esposito I will provide the specific page citation in the text.

<sup>19</sup> Throughout this chapter whenever I quote Hyland, it is in reference to his book *The Question of Play*. Therefore, hereafter, when quoting Hyland I will only provide the specific page citation in the text.

believes that play brings about possibilities to exercise freedom outside the realm of serious life.

Play, for Hyland and Esposito, then, highlights certain subjective themes; these topics, indeed, turn out to be crucial and explicit concerns for the players. They are: finitude, possibility, and freedom.

Hyland's and Esposito's theses clearly focus on what Kretchmar labeled the active moment of play, that which speaks to the player's susceptibility and readiness to find play. Of course, Hyland's and Esposito's approaches to play make sense only in relation to playgrounds and their potential to promote the manifestation of either responsive openness and-or one of the themes experienced at play. It is only in the facticity of playgrounds that players could be open and responsive. In other words, people take the stance of responsive openness and actualize some possibilities, leave others unrealized, have a sense of freedom or experience finitude as beings always situated somewhere. However, despite the necessary and evident relevance of playgrounds for their conceptions of play, Hyland and Esposito mention playgrounds only incidentally. This could be read as a reaction against those analyses that stress the passive moment of play. For Esposito, for instance, "all of the classification of the forms of play (for example, games of competition, chance, *mimicry*, vertigo) only tangentially touch upon . . . the common-root experience of all game-playing" (p. 114). Esposito and Hyland consider playgrounds to be contrived and stable

realms in which players capture such fundamental issues as death, freedom, or finitude through their playful orientation.

Hyland cannot be clearer about his emphasis and preference for the subjective aspect of play. He pointed out that play “has more to do with our stance toward a given activity than with the specific behavioral details of the activity itself” (p. 49). Along the same lines, he went on to affirm that some activities “may *invite* the stance of play (though not guarantee it) whereas others may tend to preclude it” (p. 49). Unfortunately he does not say what the qualities or conditions are that make some activities or playgrounds more prone to foster the stance of play. What are sterile playgrounds like? What qualities and characteristics do fertile ones have?

I believe that the imbalance in Hyland’s analysis is rooted in a larger problem with his thesis. The insufficiency of his, and Esposito’s, position is that neither responsive openness nor any of its depicted themes are unique to or definitive of play. Some commentators have argued that Hyland assumes a relativistic perspective that shows up in his “reluctance to describe (define) the nature of play” (Kretchmar, 1990, p. 45). Because neither Hyland nor Esposito establishes how much responsive openness or encountering possibilities is needed to distinguish play from other realms of life, we are not sure if or why play includes unusually large amounts of these components (Kretchmar, 1990, pp. 45-47). The same can be argued in relation to the other characteristics ascribed to play such as freedom and finitude. These themes are seemingly found in

varying degrees inside and outside the world of play. Consequently, if the nature of play is not clear, it is no coincidence that playgrounds are overlooked. Without exactly knowing what is being looked for, describing where and under which conditions people are at risk of finding it is a difficult enterprise.

Another example, albeit an extreme one, of seeing play as a more or less one-sided problem is provided by the analysis of Carse. This is especially true when he refers to infinite games, which unlike its finite counterpart, are not bounded by externally imposed boundaries and are internally defined. For him play resides in the subjective attitude of the player. Carse (1986) asserted that “no limitation may be imposed against infinite play” (p. 10).<sup>20</sup> For him infinite play is, in an important sense, independent of any environment in which it happens. Infinite players have their play in their hands. No wonder, then, that since for Carse each infinite player eliminates boundaries, it is “impossible to say in which world an infinite game is played” (p. 7).

For Carse infinite games involve a willful orientation that refuses to be classified and dominates the whole world of play. Carse’s glorification of infinite play and its concomitant features of freedom, choice, and uncertainty appear to be appealing. In making these assertions his narrative comes home to Esposito’s praise of play as the paradigmatic site of possibilities. However, the difference between Carse’s and Esposito’s emphasis on the attitudinal side of

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<sup>20</sup> Throughout this chapter whenever I quote Carse, it is in reference to his book *Finite and Infinite Games*. Therefore, hereafter, when quoting Carse I will only provide the specific page citation in the text.

play and the potentiality for action is that Carse praises only the opportunities that the player coins inside everyday concerns. Carse explicitly leaves out of infinite play activities that involve achieving something. To the extent that Carse's playground is constituted by life at large he undermines its role in the formation of play. "The finite play for life is serious; the infinite play of life is joyous. Infinite play resounds throughout with a kind of laughter" (p. 25). For him infinite play is an attitude towards all of life.

As beings always already situated somewhere our play is, to one degree or another, shaped and colored by our situatedness. More fruitful accounts of play need to recognize that both player and playground are not only necessary components for play to happen but also ever changing realities that mutually affect one other. A complete and accurate picture of the world of play must address the dynamic and intricate ways in which its two poles bring about, in their constant interpenetration, for example, lived possibilities and freedom. A player is inseparable from her playground and vice versa. A balanced account of this link, however, is never easy to achieve.

### **3.2.2 The problem of the absence of player-playground interpenetration**

Another issue closely associated with the disproportionate emphasis given to either the player or the playground as the primary contributing pole to the experience of play is a tendency to overlook the ways in which the two moments

of play affect one other. Although the realization that play is by necessity constituted by two moments is extremely important in appreciating its complexity, most of the theories distance these moments and hardly see them as possessing a reciprocal attracting tendency. Rather than being autonomous and fixed targets, players and playgrounds are evolving phenomena that depend on and, in turn, have an effect on one other. The centralization of the analysis in one of them misses their dynamism and mutual interpenetration.

Kretchmar is a good example of how polarizing players and playgrounds overlook the rich dialogue they establish. In this sense, his language is most revealing. For Kretchmar the second moment of play, that is the play invitations coming from environments, is “the passive-receiving side” (1992, p. 6). The active-giving condition is, then, kept for players. This terminology suggests that even when Kretchmar goes to great lengths to detail the objective side of play, in the end it is the player who has the upper hand in play. Playgrounds are more or less static. I believe that Kretchmar only made an unfortunate choice of descriptors for he acknowledged the fact that play is only possible when a player and a playground come together to form a unity. On the one hand, he said that “even when the active condition of readiness has been satisfied, potential play environments can remain mute, dead, seemingly uncooperative” (1992, p. 6). On the other hand, he admitted that “the most seductive ludic call can be missed if our ears are plugged, if the heart is hard, if the disposition to play is found wanting” (1992, p. 6).

Kretchmar goes beyond the recognition that a certain readiness and a calling environment make play. He provides some clues about the mutual interpenetration of the player and the playground. For example, Kretchmar said in relation to narrative play that “because stories continue to evolve and offer different opportunities for plot and character development, the player finds that play invitations from old sources usually do not fade away” (1992, p. 11). There is a suggestion that through its riches playgrounds attract players onto playgrounds in countless different ways. Unfortunately, Kretchmar does not explore how it is to live the sense in which the interpenetration of players and playgrounds allow playful personal stories to evolve. While in particular cases the emphasis may lie in the direction of the player or the playground, the project of addressing the question of making play must involve the way in which player and playground affect one another reciprocally. The challenge is to discover how the face of the phenomenon of play uniquely changes when the multiple avenues offered by playgrounds intersect with the plasticity of players.

Keen is an author that can be read as friendly to the notion that players and playgrounds are not only needed for play to happen but also modify one another. Although Keen focuses primarily on wonder, he sees strong ties between this unproductive attitude and the play world. For instance, reflecting on the causes of the eclipse of wonder, he considers that children “who are pushed to succeed in the utilitarian world too quickly are prematurely forced out of the natural environment of childhood—play, imagination, and leisure” (Keen, 1969, p.

58).<sup>21</sup> Play worlds and wonder inform each other. Keen champions the usually suspected cause of unproductive curiosity, intrinsic meaning and ecstatic admiration, and its irreducible role in authentic life. But, more importantly for purposes here, he also suggests that players and playgrounds, and their interrelationship are crucial in making and sustaining play.

Keen implies that play involves a human predisposition to be surprised as well as a surprising world. This is well illustrated when he claimed that “we can no more create a state of wonderment than we plan a surprise for ourselves” (pp. 27-28). As Kretchmar does with play, Keen believes that each element of wonder is necessary but neither one is sufficient. Keen makes an attempt to look at the two elements equally. He describes how wonder disrupts our common beliefs and prompts different responses. For him wonder comes from our surroundings. However, he does not leave the human moods that facilitate wonder untouched. People obsessed with control, efficiency, and productivity are not at high risk of being surprised. Keen seems to strike a balance in the analysis of the complex and confusing invitations coming from the world and the labile predisposition to let them touch us.

Despite his efforts and initial implicit suggestions, Keen also falls short of fully exploring how the objective and the subjective come to be one and have some bearing on one another. He satisfies himself with analyzing what actions

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<sup>21</sup> Throughout this chapter whenever I quote Keen, it is in reference to his book *Apology for Wonder*. Therefore, hereafter, when quoting Keen I will provide the specific page citation in the text.



follow wonder and what its role is in a meaningful life. Unfortunately, how the responses to wonder and play affect our potentialities to continue finding them is not explored. Players and playgrounds change as a result of their relationship and evolve in multiple ways. People are never the same players; and, on their side, playgrounds are never identical. Playground make people new players and players make environments new playgrounds. The task that remains is, paraphrasing Maurice Merleau-Ponty, to bring to light the playground as it is perceived and the perceiving player in their fundamental unity and reciprocity. A player is nothing but a project of a playground and the playground itself is inseparable from the player (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 430).

The analyses of play criticized in this chapter have some utility and exhibit important insights about play. Nevertheless, they also carry shortcomings—distortions, omissions, inconsistencies, and unwarranted emphases. In order to proceed with my project, and get to the intricateness of the question of play as something that exists between a player and a playground, I must first review the particularities of Merleau-Ponty's existential phenomenology. I believe that his philosophical discoveries are particularly helpful for penetrating play, its experiential value and significance as an irreducible feature of life.

## Chapter 4

### The philosophy of Maurice Merleau-Ponty

The philosophy of Merleau-Ponty which, among other things, attempted to overcome the dualistic legacy of Cartesian metaphysics is best understood in the context that witnessed its emergence. Merleau-Ponty's thought is indebted to the late nineteenth and early twentieth century's struggles to broaden the scope of philosophy. It had become, at this time, seriously limited by the overwhelming success of science, particularly the natural sciences and their explanations of the physical world. Empirical methods of investigation were believed to be fully able to explicate all human concerns, reducing theories of mental processes to the objectively and physically observable and measurable.

Scientism, as this worldview came to be known, was an outcome of René Descartes' division of reality into two incompatible substances—the *res cogitans* or thinking substance (mind, consciousness, spirit, nature) and the *res extensa* or extended substance (matter, body). Edmund Husserl, who strongly influenced the work of Merleau-Ponty, offered a key critique to Cartesian metaphysics and its corollaries. Husserl was concerned that, under the prevailing empirical framework, research on consciousness or subjectivity was subsumed under the study of objective realities. Consciousness was reduced to and treated as any other object in the world because, it was believed, only in that vein could research be open to verification or falsification. Husserl reacted against, and

refused to accept, this debasing of consciousness as just another object in the world. His work would lead to a philosophy that makes no assumptions about reality, one that simply starts with what appears to consciousness. Such a start was, for Husserl, radical because it centers around an originary mode of making sense of the world that does not presuppose a more basic one.

This is not the place for a full recapitulation of Husserl's philosophical development. However, a brief exploration of his major concepts is needed if the philosophical thought of Merleau-Ponty and the tradition from which it emerged is to be understood.<sup>22</sup> The ultimate goal of this chapter is, precisely, to explore and become acquainted with the main philosophical ideas of Merleau-Ponty, his way of thinking, and its relevance for the study of play.

#### **4.1 Husserl and the foundations of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy**

Husserl attempted to overcome the philosophic schools generated by Descartes. Instead of the aforementioned empiricism and rationalism which ended up in idealism, a position for which all reality resides in or is constructed by the mind, Husserl proposed to broaden philosophy's project. He proposed a method that does not assume beforehand the actual existence of things that are experienced. He decided to begin where others had already started—with consciousness. However, Husserl did not investigate consciousness as an

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<sup>22</sup> For a full account of Husserl's philosophic development see Farber (1967), Ricoeur (1967), Spielgerberg (1978), Stewart & Mickunas (1974), and Thévenaz (1962).

empirical reality. Neither did he contrast consciousness to the apprehended object. Rather he focused on that what appears to and occupies consciousness. In short, the content of consciousness and its realities, whatever they may be, was for Husserl worthy of investigation. He called this approach phenomenology, a term derived from two Greek words: *phainomenon* (appearance, manifestation) and *logos* (reason, word, study). To put it directly, phenomenology is the inquiry of what is immediately manifested in consciousness.

Although Husserl was not the first to use the term phenomenology in the history of philosophy, his brand of phenomenology has remained an influential philosophical movement.<sup>23</sup> His proposal of approaching phenomena as they appear themselves in consciousness, describing and rendering them as a meaningful manifestation, gave to phenomenology a crucial role in the development of twentieth century philosophy. If there is a phrase that summarizes its radically altered perspective of the world, it would be Husserl's famous plea for a return *zu den Sachen selbst* (to the things themselves). By this he meant to emphasize, once again, a fresh approach to the thing (*Sachen*) as a phenomenon of which a person is conscious. No wonder, then, that for Husserl *experience* was not limited to sense perception but to everything that appears in the dynamic of consciousness. In a sense, for Husserl, experience and phenomena came to be corresponding terms.

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<sup>23</sup> For a discussion of how the term has been used in the history of philosophy see Chisholm (1960) and Smith & Woodruff Smith (1995).

Phenomenology's focus on the *things themselves* implied for Husserl a simultaneous return to the primary task of philosophy as advanced by the ancient Greeks—the search for wisdom stripped of any presuppositions and a dedication to the systematic pursuit of the fundamental concerns of human beings. Husserl thought that phenomenology was an original beginning. The sense of a double return—both to the things of consciousness themselves and to the genuine roots of philosophy—profoundly colored his entire methodology.

The new start meant for Husserl moving away from the natural attitude to the philosophical attitude. The former is the way the world is ordinarily experienced. In such an attitude there is no inquiry about the logic of the world. It is simply assumed, discovered in its immediacy and rawness, and lived. To paraphrase Husserl, the world is *present* whether or not we pay especial attention by busying ourselves with it. For example, the football player who skillfully dribbles and deceives opponents does not entertain herself with questions about the reality she is aware of and concerned about. She just negotiates solutions to the challenges that football proposes.

The philosophical attitude, on the contrary, arises precisely when there is wonder about the basis, the *thinkability*, of that which is being experienced. The systematization of this sense of wonder constitutes the needed change of habit for philosophical inquiry to flourish. This alteration of approach—Husserl's celebrated return to the ancient Greeks—demands the suspension of all presuppositions in order to get to the root of things. Husserl's method for taking

an unpolluted perspective, the philosophical attitude, was labeled the *phenomenological reduction*.<sup>24</sup>

By way of the phenomenological reduction Husserl attempted to suspend all transcendent claims about reality. The task is to suspend all beliefs about the real that accompanies everyday life and even scientific rationality so as to concentrate on the phenomenon at hand, that is—to analyze and describe it as faithfully as possible without regard to its existence. Phenomenological reduction demands honesty in the sense that it requires an effort to provide an account free of contamination. The function of the reduction is to allow one to see that which is indubitably given and then, absolved from prejudices, describe what is essential. Husserl appealed to different terms to designate the process by which knowledge of essences is possible. Those include the phenomenological *epoché*, a Greek word used by the Skeptics that refers to a suspension of judgment, and *bracketing*, a mathematical expression, which places a problem out of play temporarily. Regardless of its designation, the reduction implies putting beliefs on hold but also a moving towards transcendental subjectivity. Putting in parenthesis all theses about the world turns consciousness back on itself.

The phenomenological reduction leaves intact consciousness and moves toward it because the act of suspending the natural attitude assumes and

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<sup>24</sup> Husserl distinguished several types of reductions. However, for purposes here it is enough to highlight the relevance of the phenomenological reduction because, for Husserl, what remains after the suspension of all assumptions constitutes the subject matter of phenomenology. For a full account of the different types of Husserlian reductions see Farber (1967), Levinas (1998), and Ricoeur (1967).

requires consciousness. Moreover, consciousness is that which makes possible the reduction itself. Husserl referred to the impossibility of bracketing consciousness as a residue of the process that discloses an absolute, apodictic, universal, or pure consciousness—the transcendental ego or subjectivity. It is precisely in this pure consciousness where phenomena manifest and remain. In turn, phenomena throw light on to the structure of consciousness. This interconnectedness between consciousness and phenomena points to the fact that consciousness is intentionally driven. This intentionality is the basic configuration of consciousness. In short, the dynamic of consciousness is always to be *about* or *of something*. The directedness of consciousness implies that it is not possible for there to be an empty consciousness or an inexperienciable object. Husserl's articulation of the intentionality of consciousness took the form of the triad *ego-cogito-cogitata*. The formula, which is permeated with Cartesian terminology, simply speaks to the fact that consciousness is not independent from its activity and that there is no conscious activity apart from its content. This radical departure from the subject-object dichotomy prompted Husserl to create a distinctive language to account for the unifying role of transcendental subjectivity.

Husserl applied to the *cogito* the Greek term *noesis* (mental perceiving) and to its content, the *cogitata*, the Greek expression *noema* (what is perceived). Of course, his novel terminology does not match the traditional philosophical dichotomy of subject and object. The *noetic-noematic* formation describes the

double sided structure of consciousness. It is through this structure that consciousness is able to grasp the unity of meaning of that which appears in day-to-day experience.

Transcendental subjectivity, that which is always presupposed in the coherence of daily living, encounters the unity of meaning. This meaning, which is possible to grasp through the intentionality of consciousness, constitutes the essence of any given phenomenon. Essences or meanings are given, presented by way of their immediacy, to consciousness. In short, what is experienced is the distinguishing character of what the thing is. For Husserl, essence, or what he called *eidos*, from the Greek word for idea, constituted that which supports and gives identity to what is empirically manifested. An *eidos* is revealed in what is originally given. No wonder, then, that Husserl talked about phenomenology as an *eidetic* science, the science of essences, or the study of being.

Husserl's work is extremely complex and at times labyrinthical; however, it is clear that for him the basic contention of phenomenology is the mutual dependency and reciprocity between consciousness and the world. The one does not make sense apart from the other. Indeed, the world is meaningless without consciousness and consciousness is inconceivable in the absence of the world. Certainly, the world cannot be interpreted as the facticity, that is the material conditions, that surrounds consciousness but as the essences related to that facticity which appear in phenomena. Essence is the fixed element of necessity, the central constitution of the object, but not the object itself. The



intended thing itself reveals its essence in and through its givenness and immediacy. The intentional character of consciousness is the condition for the unity of experience. Indeed, transcendental consciousness articulates all knowledge and gives it meaning. This transcendental character is what permits the merging of perspectives and allows for a coherent life. Husserl's phenomenology is a transcendental phenomenology.

A final note regarding Husserl's philosophical development needs to be mentioned before seeing the connection between Husserl's phenomenology and the subsequent work of Merleau-Ponty. Concerned that his philosophy had moved away from the everyday world, Husserl advanced and analyzed the notion of the *Lebenswelt* (lived world or life-world). However, it was not until after his death that Husserl's writings concerning this topic were published. The *Lebenswelt* refers to the world that is experienced in the course of ordinary life, the world in which one is immersed. To put it differently, the *Lebenswelt* is the context (Husserl also used the word *horizon*) in which experience is possible. This horizon along with that which appears constitutes, for Husserl, the background of phenomena. It is clear that the world in question is not only the *world* studied by the natural sciences but the totality of what a person can be conscious. The *Lebenswelt* was such a significant move that many philosophers, including Merleau-Ponty, took it for their own research and understood phenomenology in a new light. As Husserl would have wanted, the *Lebenswelt* allowed new beginnings.

## 4.2 Merleau-Ponty's critique of Husserl

Merleau-Ponty recognized Husserl as the founder of phenomenology and identified his own philosophy as residing within the phenomenological movement. Indeed, Merleau-Ponty interpreted phenomenology at large and his own work through and in the light of the insights of the forbearer he never met. Merleau-Ponty took seriously Husserl's quest for a radical beginning. He manifested this commitment in the preface of his magnum opus *Phenomenology of Perception* stating that philosophy must, as Husserl said, put itself to "a dialogue or infinite meditation, and, in so far as it remains faithful to its intention, never knowing where it is going" (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. xxi).<sup>25</sup> It is no surprise then that both thinkers believed that phenomenology was a term analogous to philosophy and an invitation to initiate reflection not bounded by any preconception. Merleau-Ponty summarized this attitude suggesting that "true philosophy consists in relearning to look at the world" (1962, p. xx).

Merleau-Ponty accepted the phenomenological rejection of the reductionistic character of traditional philosophies. That is, with Husserl, he believed that consciousness is not an object among objects in nature, and he thought that some phenomena cannot be accounted for appropriately by means of empirical methods. Phenomenology does not make ontological assumptions and begins with that which occupies consciousness. In other words, Merleau-

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<sup>25</sup> Throughout this chapter I quote three works by Merleau-Ponty. Therefore, hereafter, when quoting Merleau-Ponty I will provide the specific year and page citation in the texts.

Ponty agreed with the phenomenological notion of intentionality in the sense of consciousness always being *consciousness of something* and with it he followed Husserl in his journey back to the *things themselves*, albeit in a unique way.

Merleau-Ponty spoke the language of phenomenology and took up many of its fundamental commitments, but he was not an uncritical disciple of Husserl. Merleau-Ponty interpreted phenomenological concepts in his own way and distanced himself from Husserl—at least in his earlier manifestations. Indeed, Merleau-Ponty considered the later works of Husserl, those concerned with the *Lebenswelt*, to be his most significant contributions. Merleau-Ponty believed that phenomenology “*can be practiced and identified as a manner or style of thinking*” (1962, p. viii). It is important to review how his style differed from that of Husserl in order to see how his distinct method led to equally unique conclusions.

As noted above, one of the most useful concepts in Husserl’s phenomenology for Merleau-Ponty was intentionality. Indeed, for him intentionality constitutes consciousness’ fundamental structure. As seen, this configuration, which Husserl named *ego-cogito-cogitata*, revolves around two poles: the *noetic (cogito)* and the *noematic (cogitata)*. By this Husserl showed that consciousness is not a thing in itself but an activity directed beyond itself. Consciousness is never empty and is always co-determined. This unity of consciousness is ever present although, through reflection, the focus of investigation can be shifted to one of the poles. For Husserl, the ego remains conscious of its activity and can be studied just as objects are capable of being

studied. In other words, intentionality is conscious of itself and can grasp itself as an object residing outside the ego. Merleau-Ponty disagreed with this claim. For him, the ego is so enmeshed in intentionality that it cannot be held as an object in itself.

For Merleau-Ponty consciousness is intertwined so deeply with the world that it is extremely difficult to illuminate it by means of reflection. Husserl, on the other hand, argued that there is a distance between the *noetic* and the *noematic* poles such that the pure ego of the phenomenological reduction can be considered outside of this relationship. Merleau-Ponty saw nothing like this. For him, consciousness has no distance from that of which it is conscious. In a sense, Merleau-Ponty radicalized Husserl's *noetic* and *noematic* poles by admitting no opposition. This point was illustrated when Merleau-Ponty said that "consciousness is in the first place not a matter of 'I think that' but of 'I can'" (1962, p. 137).<sup>26</sup> To put it differently, intentionality refers not only to the *cogito* but necessarily to the whole constellation of one's bonds to the world. Consciousness can never be absolute for Merleau-Ponty, for it is always already in a dialectic relationship with its surroundings. Because of that, it can neither be abstracted nor constituted apart from the world.

The notion that the *cogito* is "the simultaneous contact with my own being and with the world's being" (1962, p. 377) differentiates Merleau-Ponty's from Husserl's intentionality. For Merleau-Ponty there is an awareness of the world

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<sup>26</sup> The phrase *I can* was originally coined by Husserl. For a discussion of how Husserl developed the phrase see Sheets-Johnstone (1999).

that comes before reflection. Of course, this pre-reflective awareness is not accessible to self-consciousness. Merleau-Ponty also called this expanded notion of intentionality pre-objective or antepredicative consciousness. He also referred to it frequently as *being-in-the-world*. While Husserl saw in transcendental phenomenology a capacity to describe the world from the viewpoint of a worldless observer, Merleau-Ponty pointed to the concrete aspects of human existence as the ground for his phenomenology. Merleau-Ponty understood his phenomenology as one committed to a human reality that is inextricably worldly-oriented, resulting not only in a phenomenological but also existential style of thinking. Intentionality for Merleau-Ponty, then, assumed itself to be in the world even before it is aware of its being-in-the-world. In short, people apprehend themselves prior to any conceptualization or thematization of our relationship to the world.

Merleau-Ponty's existential phenomenology leads us to investigate his position in relation to Husserl's phenomenological reduction and its promised avenue to essences. As seen, Husserl's reduction, which places both our natural attitude and scientific theories towards appearing phenomena between brackets, allows the discovery of essences. Central to the reduction is the suspension of attention to the question of being. Husserl's phenomenology asserts that an essential core is given in phenomena and this is available to further analysis. Merleau-Ponty's stance towards the reduction, on the other hand, is complex. At

first sight it seems that he embraced it without qualification, but a careful reading shows that he seriously challenged the idea.

On the one hand, for Merleau-Ponty, phenomenology dealt with the study of essences. But in a more original sense it was also a thinking that returned these essences back to existence or *facticity*. Merleau-Ponty accepted the reduction and its corollary—essences—not as the end but rather as a means to enter existence. The essences discovered through the reduction are merely *separated essences* or linguistic fixations that permit “direct access to what they designate” (1962, p. xv). In short, the reduction is only a transitional step to the *real* destination: the reality of human beings. As Merleau-Ponty put it:

The need to proceed by way of essences does not mean that philosophy takes them as its object, but, on the contrary, that our existence is too tightly held in the world to be able to know itself as such at the moment of its involvement, and that it requires the field of ideality in order to become acquainted with and to prevail over its facticity. (1962, pp. xiv-xv).

One of the lessons from the need of *separated essences of language* is that language—or more correctly expression—is extremely important for obtaining access to insights about existence. It will later be seen, following Merleau-Ponty, that the key is not what words, or other forms of expression, mean but what things mean. This is the deeper sense of a return to the *things themselves*. Separated essences are points in the flux of existence waiting to be

overcome. Merleau-Ponty gave a new meaning to the phenomenological reduction and, in the process rejected Husserl's idealism. At best, the phenomenological reduction is a tool to give an account of the emergence of the world. Merleau-Ponty himself was very clear about this. He said that "the most important lesson which the reduction teaches us is the impossibility of a complete reduction" (1962, p. xiv). According to Merleau-Ponty, humans are far from being an absolute consciousness. Humans are in the world, and the more they dig into consciousness the more they find this interpenetration with the world. If bracketing were such a powerful tool, able to encapsulate the world understood as Merleau-Ponty did, it would also have to parenthesize consciousness itself, for "consciousness always finds itself already at work in the world" (1962, p. 432).

It is the idea of the fundamental intertwinedness of human beings and the world that prompted Merleau-Ponty to alter Husserl's phenomenological reduction. This idea also put Merleau-Ponty at odds with Husserl's residual element of the suspension of the natural and scientific beliefs—the transcendental ego. It has to be remembered that for Husserl the reduction discloses an ego capable of grasping the conditions of necessity for that which appears. The transcendental ego is distinguished from the fleshy ego that struggles with the facticity of the world and is shaped, in part, by it. For Merleau-Ponty the transcendental, thinking ego is an illusion detached from its mundane roots. While Husserl bracketed the reality of the world, Merleau-Ponty refused to do so because it would have eliminated the ground for his conception of the ego.

People are certain about the world. Existence is, precisely, a dialogue with it. In such a dialogue meaning abruptly originates and arises. People's embodied character would be for Merleau-Ponty a vital avenue to understand original meaning.

It has to be clear now that Merleau-Ponty's resignification and rejection of Husserl's phenomenological reduction and transcendental ego respectively are reactions to what Merleau-Ponty considered to be positions dangerously close to Cartesianism. The Husserlian transcendental ego, with its attempt to analyze the field of presences regardless of its reality, became for Merleau-Ponty too close to the Cartesian *cogito*, which was an indubitable point of departure. To be sure, Husserl's intentions were different from those of Descartes. Although Husserl did not doubt reality by suspending it, Merleau-Ponty thought that the concept of the transcendental *cogito* had to be replaced by one which takes account of existence. For him the *cogito* was a being-in-the-world. The task of phenomenology was precisely to describe the ambiguous interdependence of the ego and the world. Merleau-Ponty's study and emphasis on Husserl's notion of the *Lebenswelt* allowed him to develop a style of thinking that focused on our original mode of having a world—specifically on our embodied character.

The consideration of phenomenology's main topics (intentionality, the phenomenological reduction, and the transcendental ego) as proposed by Husserl has shown a profound difference between him and Merleau-Ponty. There is no doubt that Husserlian phenomenology had a significant impact on



Merleau-Ponty, but Merleau-Ponty critically examined that tradition. This phenomenology departed from the idealistic tendencies in Husserl's thought. This revised phenomenology is a "philosophy for which the world is always 'already there' before reflection begins—as an inalienable presence; and all its efforts are concentrated upon re-achieving a direct and primitive contact with the world, and endowing that contact with a philosophic status" (1962, p. vii).

This means that for Merleau-Ponty the truth lies in the world we experience prior to any reflection. His target is the description of the pre-objective world, the world in which we exist. "Truth," Merleau-Ponty said, "does not 'inhabit' only 'the inner man,' or more accurately, there is no inner man, man is in the world, and only in the world does he know himself" (1962, p. xi). The reference is to the fact that human beings are situated in concrete contexts. To exist is to be engaged in the world. As such Merleau-Ponty's style of thinking is existential, anchored in a pre-reflective understanding of how people are in the world. In daily life humans comprehend themselves before any predication.

#### **4.3 Merleau-Ponty's fundamental claims**

Merleau-Ponty's philosophy is one that presupposes a wonder about the revelation of meaning in perception as it is radically and immediately grasped. The whole idea is to recapture the world and its significances as directly experienced. In this philosophy, "the world is denied as exteriority and affirmed

as ‘surrounding,’ the ego is denied as interiority and affirmed as ‘existing”” (Lyotard, 1991, p. 80).

To those affirmations, to the world as surroundings and to the subject as existing in that surrounding, in short, to Merleau-Ponty’s main discoveries, is where I now move. Their study will allow a full picture of the relevance of Merleau-Ponty’s existential phenomenology, a style of thought free of Cartesian strain, to understand human beings in their full complexity, as meaningful totalities.

#### **4.3.1 Perception and embodiment**

The original lies for Merleau-Ponty in the depths and intricacies of the unity between acting and surrounding. Whatever it is that people are conscious of, it arises from the depth of that dialogue, which constitutes a *shared or common logos*, between consciousness and world. This shared *logos* has its climax when meaning suddenly presents itself prior to any reflective, personal, objective, conscious, or predicative act. Indeed, meaning precedes those acts. Because of the insurmountable difficulty in finding clear demarcations in meanings coming from our relation with the world, Merleau-Ponty’s thinking has been called a philosophy of the ambiguous (De Waelhens, 1951). This ambiguity does not refer to a sense of unintelligibility but to a repudiation of Cartesian fixed

boundaries. Ambiguity points towards a *chiaroscuro* where, to the extent that all things are interwoven, sharp delimitations are not possible.

However, Merleau-Ponty believed that there was a possibility, albeit limited, to erect through expressive means measures of knowledge of the primordial contact we have with the world. Merleau-Ponty based his style of thinking on the fundamental unity of the *body-subject* and world as experienced. Expression is also a crucial category for it allows the most profound return to the things themselves, that is a “return to that world which precedes knowledge, of which knowledge always *speaks*” (1962, p. ix). Merleau-Ponty *descended* to or penetrated the realm of existence about which we construct discourses by paying attention to the ever-present ground, the very possibility of discursivity: perception.

For Merleau-Ponty “perception is not a science of the world, it is not even an act, a deliberate taking up of a position; it is the background from which all acts stand out, and is presupposed by them” (1962, pp. x-xi). He could hardly have been clearer about the primacy of perception. Of course, Merleau-Ponty did not refer to it in the tradition of objective and meaningless sense data that, once associated, form the phenomena of perception. Rather, he considered perception as the *soil* that makes possible all knowledge. There is no doubt, then, why its study is of utmost relevance. Perception constitutes the privileged access to the world prior to any scientific or theoretical interpretation. “To perceive in the full sense of the word” was for Merleau-Ponty “not to judge, it is to

apprehend an immanent sense in the sensible before judgment begins. The phenomenon of true perception offers, therefore, a meaning inherent in the signs, and of which judgment is merely the optional expression” (1962, p. 35).

Perception is living meaning without the mediation of reflection.

From such an account, perception can be considered that which permits tracking of the meaning present in life before reflection occurs. But the notion of unveiling meaning does not denote a passive involvement. On the contrary, to the extent that people are their surroundings, perception and its consequent meaning imply an active commitment to those surroundings. The difficulty of establishing clear-cut boundaries is seen once again in perception. Meanings are neither totally bestowed upon humans nor fully created by them. They are both, simultaneously. In other words, perception far from being an issue of either-or is an affirmation of human beings' bodily character in the world. In this sense, perception is existential for it speaks to the dialectical pre-conscious relation between consciousness and surroundings. Merleau-Ponty thought about perception in terms of a perceiving consciousness that is incarnated. It is precisely in this incarnation, as bodies, that “we learn to know that union of essence and existence which we shall find again in perception generally” (1962, p. 147). Every perception, which is our original relation with the world, is a bodily one. Merleau-Ponty's theory of perception can be regarded as his most open affront to Cartesian dualism and its resulting reductionism.

Along with and closely related to the notion of perception in Merleau-Ponty's philosophy is people's inextricable, embodied engagement in the world. People are, he believes, in a continuous dialogue with the world. The latter is only accessible to people through their corporeality. People's bodies constitute their entry into the world and the ways in which the world is available are radically connected with and affected by their bodies. "To be a body" said Merleau-Ponty "is to be tied to a certain world" (1962, p. 148). On the one hand people's bodies give them a world, and on the other hand the very structure of the world depends on their bodies and capacities. That is why it was mentioned earlier that, for Merleau-Ponty, consciousness is not a matter of *I think* but rather *I can*.

Consciousness is also facticity. For Merleau-Ponty a human body is neither mere materiality nor just spirituality but a single reality. There is no unidirectional causal relationship here but a radically different way of approaching embodiment than the one suggested by Cartesian ideology. In order to avoid a language with a dualistic flavor, Merleau-Ponty coined new terms to honor a monism that represented a transformation of the concept of subjectivity. In short, Merleau-Ponty had a different view of what it is to be a *person*.

At the center of this idea is the claim that "consciousness projects itself into a physical world and has a body" (1962, p. 137). This reveals that existence is based on the bodily foundation of consciousness. Merleau-Ponty is not concerned with the *body-object*, the thing-body that depicts the human body as one object amidst others. His original body is not an object but a subject that, by

being pre-reflectively aware of the world does not need a subjective principle different from itself.

Clearly, the body as subject is distinct from the body as object. In the former sense, subjectivity for Merleau-Ponty transcends the latter approach to the body because it is the source of existence. Defying Cartesian descriptions, he refers to the mode of being of human bodies as the *body-subject*, *ego-body*, or *I-body*. What in traditional philosophy is considered thinking, the *cogito*, or spirituality pops up under this framework, not as a detached will, but as a consequence of a familiarity with the world already present. The former is an extension of the latter. That is, all abstractions originate in the body-subject or, as Merleau-Ponty also puts it, in the *lived-body*.

The body-subject, as the site of the shared *logos* with the surrounding, presents people precisely with the world and its meaning through perception. Intentionality is possible only as a body-subject. This serves as the very foundation of intentional and free living. People start with a meaning-structure that is always already there but they also give meaning to that structure even before any act of reflection. People become human, for Merleau-Ponty, in their autonomous bodily existence. For him the body-subject *lives* in what is being perceived. There is no doubt about how different Merleau-Ponty's conception of personhood is from that of Cartesian tradition. Merleau-Ponty said:

The body is our general medium for having a world. Sometimes it is restricted to the actions necessary for the conservation of life,

and accordingly it posits around us a biological world; at other times, elaborating upon these primary actions and moving from their literal to a figurative meaning, it manifests through them a core of new significance: this is true of motor habits such as dancing. Sometimes, finally, the meaning aimed at cannot be achieved by the body's natural means; it must then build itself an instrument, and it projects thereby around itself a cultural world. (1962, p. 146)

The body-subject as meaning-giver constitutes the whole principle of existence. It is important to appreciate all the dimensions in which this principle unfolds, as the above quotation aptly suggests, ranging from the biological to the cultural. The body-subject is in a permanent struggle to reorganize its own being in higher and more complex forms. It rises beyond its natural capacities and transforms them. An important level of this creative ability, which reveals different modes of orientation towards or engagements with the surrounding, is the realm of expression.

#### **4.3.2 Expression**

In the preceding pages I have described Merleau-Ponty's poignant notion of the body-subject and its importance for his theory of perception. I will focus now on the roles that Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of the body occupies for

human expression. For him the body-subject, as the fundamental mode of being-in-the-world, and expression are intimately interwoven.

Merleau-Ponty's analysis of expression is central to his philosophy. This is the notion that all human lives and projects, unfold from and are rooted in the body-subject. Although he focused mainly on *language*, he clearly stated that his analysis was concerned with all forms of expression. Indeed, Merleau-Ponty often included non-verbal modes of expression such as gestures, motor acts, painting, music, and dancing as examples of languages. Nonetheless, regardless of the means of expression, Merleau-Ponty's central point was to show the interconnectedness between the body-subject and expression. To the extent that language has been presumed as the primary site of thinking, Merleau-Ponty's larger project was to show how thinking and body consider each other. In short, he demonstrated the bodily character of thought.

"Language bears the meaning of thought as a footprint signifies the movement and effort of a body" (1964b, p. 44) said Merleau-Ponty. It is no coincidence that he made an analogy between the relationships of footprint to body with that of speech to thinking. Both realities, walking-footprinting and talking-thinking, refer to meaning as a dialectical relationship rather than to the causal result of two distinct elements affecting each other. Traditional philosophy has rendered the word uttered or the footprint left on the ground as distinct from thinking and walking respectively. In other words, these symbols come from an *interiority*. Consequently word and footprint are merely external phenomena. To



say it differently, the meanings of the terms *word* and *footprint* do not need and are independent from the actual word and footprint themselves. However, for Merleau-Ponty this was not the case. Thoughts are not completed internally and then wait for words to express them. He said that there is “no language prior to language. His [the author’s] speech satisfies him only because it reaches an equilibrium whose conditions his speech itself defines, and attains a state of perfection which has no model” (1964b, p. 43). Language is the completion of thought. The meaning of language resides in itself.

Merleau-Ponty denies that the word is distinct from the thought expressed. Thoughts are not internally completed and then made manifest through words. On the contrary, thoughts seek words for their own completion. Words are not tools serving preformed thoughts but the incarnation and performance of thoughts themselves. To put it differently, our bodily condition is the possibility for the manifestation of thought. Words, and therefore language, are existential. If language, or more broadly expression, is rooted in the body-subject, it discloses a lived situation, a certain attitude, a function of the world that conditions it. Thoughts for Merleau-Ponty are not real until they are expressed. The meaning of language lies contained in the language itself. He said:

The process of expression, when it is successful, does not merely leave for the reader and the writer himself a kind of reminder, it brings the meaning into existence as a thing at the very heart of the text, it brings it to life in an organism of words, establishing it in the

writer or the reader as a new sense organ, opening a new field or a new dimension to our experience. (1962, p. 182)

This makes it clear that the meaning of that which is being expressed finds existence in the facticity of the expression. This is well known, and accepted, as Merleau-Ponty himself recognized, in non-verbal modes of expression such as dancing, music, or sports. For instance, it is hardly possible to distinguish the meaning of the dance from the choreography performed, the significance of an aria from its sounds, or the implication of a football direct free-kick from its skillful execution. This unity of meaning-thinking-speaking, or better to say the self-contained character of expression, is what Merleau-Ponty described as possessing a *new sense organ* or the *gift of a tongue*.

For Merleau-Ponty then, “the writer’s act of expression is not very different from the painter’s” (1964b, p. 45). Expression is embodied thought. We can *speak* either verbally or non-verbally. As Merleau-Ponty himself suggested, there are *silent voices*; however, every voice springs from our bodily being. Thought is embodied meaning that belongs simultaneously to the body-subject and the world. Our embodiment constitutes our power of expression. It projects existential possibilities and manifests in the world diverse realms of human life.

To summarize, it is possible to say using Merleau-Ponty’s own words, that expression “does not translate ready-made thought, but accomplishes it” (1962, p. 178). The illusion that the meaning of speech, either in its verbal or non-verbal dimensions, can be separated from, and understood in isolation of, speech itself

comes from the fact that once a word, sound, or movement has been created it becomes a fixation, a solidification available to be transmitted and incorporated. For Merleau-Ponty, the “empirical use of already established language should be distinguished from its creative use” (1964b, p. 44). He emphasized that difference by making an important distinction between the *spoken word* (*parole parlée*) and the *speaking word* (*parole parlante*).

#### **4.3.3 The spoken word and the speaking word**

Merleau-Ponty believed that it was important to distinguish between modes of expression that are identical with thought and those that do not carry a significant intention but just recollect ossified meanings. Any language, or means of expression, either allows the mere repetition of words as established or the creation of new complexities. A footballer may simply reiterate a strategic movement or skill an endless number of times during a training session until it is automated or she may come up with a novel way to trick the opposing wall in a free kick either during the course of a game or during a training session. This exemplifies the core of what Merleau-Ponty labeled as the spoken word and the speaking word respectively. The former is monotonous, repetitive, and dry; the latter is unique and fresh. For him people only possess the gift of a tongue when enacting and living a speaking word. However, the gift of having a tongue originates in the spoken word, in a ground common to all people. Like the

possibilities open to a person's feet from its anatomical-physiological determinancies, this person has the possibilities for a tongue from the determinancies of language. In the tension between the given, on the one hand, and the potential to create from and through the given, on the other, resides the dissimilarities between the spoken word and the speaking word.

The spoken word constitutes for Merleau-Ponty the dimension of already established meanings. He referred to it also as *inauthentic*, *repetitive*, *empirical*, and *secondary* or *second order speech*. In general, the spoken word is represented as the collection of terms compacted in dictionaries and encyclopedias, in books containing magical recipes for becoming an accomplished artist overnight, or in those heavily promoted pedagogical visual aids pretending that one can almost automatically become a skillful football player. To put it differently, the spoken word tends to reproduce reality and has become stereotyped by everyday usage. This kind of speech does not bring into being a significant intention. This rigidity uncovers the risk of the spoken word: among them phony, repetitious, or uncreative expressions. Merleau-Ponty noticed that this layer of expression constitutes the wealth of words available for common use. However, at the same time, the content of the spoken word allows us to share the world and the mere participation in it holds the potentiality for its transformation. It is precisely here that the value of this kind of speech resides. "From these gains," said Merleau-Ponty, "other acts of authentic expression—the writer's, artist's or philosopher's—are made possible" (1962, p. 197).

The speaking word, also known as *authentic, creative, primary, or first order speech* is the taking up of the world in a new fashion, a reshaping of the given word. Enacting a speaking word implies the transformation of the pre-established wealth of a word. It is the word sung for the first time. It does not necessarily mean the singing of a novel word but the incarnation of a new thought, a new intention, a new being-in-the-world. First order speech captures the sense of being the first human being who ever expressed that new coherence. What happens in the speaking word is the creation of a new reality, the crafting of a new dimension of existence. This kind of expression gives fresh meaning to words and makes them say what they have never yet said. The speaking word reveals the character of language more clearly because it is the opening of the plenitude of being. It is the unfolding of a significative intention. In living the speaking word, thought actualizes itself and authenticity is possible. Authentic words secrete their own meaning. As Merleau-Ponty said, truly expressive speech “does not simply choose a sign for an already defined signification . . . It gropes around a significative intention which is not guided by any text, and which is precisely in the process of writing the text” (1964b, p. 46). For him, then, authentic expression, that which accomplishes thought, is circumscribed by the manifestation of the speaking word.

The speaking word, that which is formulated for the first time, constitutes the act of speaking in the full sense. On the other hand, the spoken word is “speech about speech” (1962, p. 178). The latter, using Merleau-Ponty’s

example about love, appears as the love we read about in books and magazines; the former, on the contrary, is the experience of love as it is. A fully *speaking lover* does not, cannot, designate love but expresses it as the “way in which he establishes his relations with the world; it [love] is an existential signification” (1962, p. 381). In other words, those who originally express themselves—including lovers—“do not illustrate a ready-made thought, but make that thought their own” (1962, p. 389). There is no coincidence that for Merleau-Ponty the speaking word and the spoken word reflected the relationship between perception, our fundamental and original attachment to the world, and science, an endeavor that “manipulates things and gives up living in them . . . [coming] face to face with the real world only at rare intervals. . . . as though it meant nothing to us” (1964c, p. 159). Rich expression does not re-enact a thought already learnt but springs itself forward into existence. In the sphere of the speaking word, speech, thought coming into existence, takes meaning as it is enacted and experienced. To put it differently, there is a *speaking subject* that creates or projects meaning.

Merleau-Ponty emphasized the notion of the speaking subject to demonstrate the inconvenience of appealing to absolute origins as the foundation of unfolding meaning. Empirical or positivistic (concerned with the object) as well as rationalistic or intellectualist (concerned with the ego) approaches to language took, for Merleau-Ponty, the word as either an independent or an empty container. For both, the speaker is distanced from her speech. “In the first case,

[empiricism] we are on this side of the word as meaningful; in the second, [rationalism] we are beyond it. In the first there is nobody to speak; in the second, there is certainly a subject, but a thinking one, not a speaking one” (1962, p. 177).

Empiricism tries to explain language through natural laws that account for the association of words. This process is seen as a matter of necessity. Rationalism, on the other hand, conceives a subject that possesses ideas that are prior to the enactment of speech. In other words, thinking is independent of speech. Merleau-Ponty rejected these notions as mechanistic and reductionistic. For him, there was neither an imposition of meaning by an external datum nor a meaning constructed in isolation from speech. On the contrary, for Merleau-Ponty, meaning arises in our inextricable dialogue with the world. We are meaning givers in the sense that our openness and boundedness to the world finds in speech the completion of thought. This is why Merleau-Ponty believed that “*the word has meaning*” (1962, p. 177).

To the extent that the speaking word is the incarnation of thought, the speaking subject, as a creator of meaning, exists. In short, the speaking-subject was for Merleau-Ponty a subject that comes to be in authentic expression. The speaking subject possesses a unique style of being and embodies the expressive character of intentionality. “Speech,” said Merleau-Ponty, “puts up a new sense, if it is authentic speech . . . We must therefore recognize as an ultimate fact this

open and indefinite power of giving significance” (1962, p. 194). Expression is existence in action.

The power of giving significance refers to an expansion of the aforementioned existential dimension of the *I can* which, as noted earlier, Merleau-Ponty used to replace the Cartesian *I think*. For him, the speaking-subject lives in a unique aura, for she is enwrapped or blessed by a “miracle of an immediately apprehended clarity” (1962, p. 391). This means that people’s ambiguous, obscure relation to the world is lived as transparent when authentically expressing themselves. People understand themselves, the world, and their interrelationship in the immediacy of expression. What is expressed is inseparable from the expression itself. Merleau-Ponty also labeled this lived unambiguous instance of understanding *inspiration*. The “inspired man had the gift of tongues” (1964c, p. 165). Inspired, human beings impregnate and are impregnated with meaning; they captivate and are captivated by an experienced synergy and synchronicity with the world that allows new vistas on life.

Inspiration, the unfolding of meaning that is “so slightly discernible that it becomes impossible to distinguish what sees and what is seen, what paints and what is painted” (1964c, p. 167) vanishes with our attempts “to break it down to what we believe to be its components elements” (1962, p. 391). No wonder that Merleau-Ponty criticized science so severely. Contrary to science, honoring the situatedness of the lived-body and its tacit understanding, people can recognize



moments of clarity born and developed in ambiguity. It is there that human beings transcend themselves.

#### **4.4 A synthesis of Merleau-Ponty's philosophic vision**

Merleau-Ponty's legacy is undeniably connected with his insistence on pointing out the embodied character of human existence. Although this might be seen as a truism, the fact is that a good portion of modern philosophy and science has proceeded under the continuing influence of Cartesian thought. Merleau-Ponty did not simply refer to the fact that people have bodies with certain features. More radically, he believed that people are bodies, that their modes of being, their access to the world, their powers of thinking and creativity, are in essential respects affected by their embodiment. Because people are by necessity tethered to the facticity of their bodies, and because he wanted to distinguish his views from mechanistic approaches, Merleau-Ponty referred to people as *body-subjects*. By doing this he not only dignified human embodiment but, in an important sense, overcame dualism as well.

While dualism sees the body as an object among objects, Merleau-Ponty's monism understood the body-subject as existence, openness, and interaction with the world. On the same line, while dualism assumes the spirit, soul, or consciousness as the origin of knowledge, or life at large, Merleau-Ponty's holism claimed that the spiritual life is rooted in the body-subject. For him, a

subject is a carnal consciousness always already situated in the world. The fact that the body-subject is inextricably tied to and situated in the world implies the impossibility of providing a purely objective account of the subject without referencing the surroundings in which the body-subject is immersed. The body-subject is precisely what she is in mutual configurations with her surroundings or field of meanings. In other words, the body-subject is not in the world as any other object is, a thing apprehendable in itself, in isolation from the world in which she occupies space. On the contrary, the body-subject can only be approached in a world that has meaning for her, a world that touches, moves, and invites her, for example, to aspire, have goals, or imagine projects.

In Merleau-Ponty's philosophical anthropology, to be a body-subject, is to be aware of the world. People have privileged modes of access to the world through perception. Perception refers to the apprehension of the basic experience of the world. It constitutes people's primary opening to the world, the inescapable background to all other forms of having the world. For Merleau-Ponty perception is that which immediately appears to people. It is possible to see here how perception mediates the coalescing of the body-subject and the world. People's original entry to the world is through perception and it is a function belonging to their always already embodied engagement with the world. This is what Merleau-Ponty understood as being-in-the-world. Awareness of the world cannot be suspended. Humans are condemned to a world that exudes meaning. From this ever-present, pre-conscious and bodily attachment to the

world, the body-subject constructs other ways to access the world. The body-subject acts, desires, and has purposes from somewhere, from where she is.

In perception the world is crudely, immediately given to people. This presentation happens as people are already located in the world. Far from being passive observers to the spectacle of the world, people's perceptions are experienced as a field of potentiality. The body-subject, as the carrier of intentions, refers to the whole constellation of people's bonds to the world, which includes their capabilities to act in it. To put it differently, the perceptual field is lived in terms of its possibilities. People are open to the world through their potentiality to act. The body-subject, then, makes sense in relation to intentionality. The world that opens up in perception is not just the world of properties but the world in which things have meaning for people, a world that is not indifferent to humans' possibilities. Merleau-Ponty's wrote that: "the primary truth is indeed 'I think', but only provided that we understand thereby 'I belong to myself' while belonging to the world" (1962, p. 407). To think is to live the possibility of the *I can*. This is even clearer when Merleau-Ponty noted:

Our body, to the extent that it moves itself about, that is, to the extent that it is inseparable from a view of the world and is that view itself brought into existence, is the condition of possibility, not only of the geometrical synthesis, but of all expressive operations and all acquired views which constitute the cultural world. (1962, p. 388)

Perception is never neutral, never innocent. Through perception, I am open to the world, a world in which I act but one that also acts on me. This mutual dependency is articulated in perception through people's possibilities to act on the world. This reflects the primacy of perception so celebrated by Merleau-Ponty in the sense that it is an irreducible way of understanding the world. In fact, all other modes of knowing the world rest upon it. As Merleau-Ponty's above quotation indicated, all kinds of expression have developed from the body-subject.

Merleau-Ponty's analysis of language shows the veracity of his fundamental thesis, that is, the notion that all human stances unfold from the body-subject. As such, for him, any system of expression, verbal or non-verbal, cannot be abstracted from the body-subject who expresses and her context. There is no meaning apart from that which is being expressed. To say it differently, thinking is not real unless and until it is made manifest. Expression incarnates thinking. There is no causal or exterior relation between words, broadly understood, and thoughts; they cannot be extricated from each other. The significance of words in speech is self-contained.

The illusion that the meaning of words can be isolated from the speaker can be traced to the sedimentation of expression. Merleau-Ponty specified the *spoken word* as the available repertoire of words in common use. However, creative or authentic expression is only possible when the spoken word gives way to the *speaking word*. The latter is the transformation of established

concepts so they express a new signification. For Merleau-Ponty it is only in this last sense that the word has authentic or genuine meaning. The *speaking subject* actualizes thinking in expression. She does not merely reproduce but brings into existence a novel significance. As a speaking subject her existence is enveloped by that which is being expressed, by the meaning projected.

Authentic expression, an always already form of embodied action, allows ways of accessing the world that otherwise would be inaccessible.

Merleau-Ponty's existential philosophy allows for authenticity and novelty. To the extent that human beings do not manifest an interior reality but are in a dialectical relationship with the world, meaning and existence conflate. Because human beings' intentionality resides in and is a manifestation of that dialectical exchange, the birth of meaning is ambiguous. It comes from a *chiaroscuro* that forces and allows what Merleau-Ponty desired—a return to meaning as it is found in perception and its establishment as the source of new beginnings. There is no better summary of Merleau-Ponty's own vision than his own revealing words. He said: "because we are in the world, we are *condemned to meaning*" (1962, p. xix). And added: "The essential point is clearly to grasp the project towards the world that we are" (1962, p. 405).

#### 4.5 The relevance of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy to the study of play

The philosophy of Merleau-Ponty can be used to illuminate the issue of play. The fact that he explains existence as the fundamental dialogue—shared *logos*—between the body-subject and her surroundings has interesting implications for the study of play. The challenge, using Merleau-Ponty's own phraseology, is to penetrate our mode of being-in-the-world while at play. If the world is not merely the sum of physical characteristics in front of people but the multitude of meanings transpiring from these features through their potentialities, play has to be approached in its immediate apprehension by means of the special contact between people's intentionalities and the world.

An analysis of play enlightened by the work of Merleau-Ponty would involve a description of play as it is lived. Such an experiential account would allow the uncovering of the different layers of this phenomenon so as to arrive at a primary understanding of its structure. Through this type of analysis what it means *to play* should come to be realized, appreciated, and refined. It is worth keeping in mind that this meaning comes alive only as people play and is not the result of either an a priori or a posteriori reflective operation. What an existential phenomenological analysis does is thoroughly describe play as it is immediately and directly apprehended.

For Merleau-Ponty such an apprehension of reality is not possible by an attitude that seeks for an autonomous or hidden *logos* but one of wonder, surprise, awe, and, most importantly, respect for the world and that which is

grasped in human contact with it. The core of the idea is to describe a phenomenon, in this case play, as it reveals itself in the world. Rather than utilizing a scientific drive that would require the isolation, manipulation, and control of play, an existential phenomenological approach to this phenomenon requires the care that is only known to people in love. In other words, if the style of being at play is to be made manifest, even if incompletely so, there is a need to resist the temptations posed by reductionistic scientific understandings of reality. Merleau-Ponty's own words are illustrative here. For him science is "a thinking which looks on from above, and thinks of the object-in-general" (1964c, p. 160).

The type of study that explores play as it is immediately lived in the world is, of course, a departure from what Merleau-Ponty called, referring to the study of language, the empiricist and the intellectualist traditions. Applied to play, the former would see this phenomenon as a mechanism whose value resides outside itself. For example, play prepares people for future roles in life, allows for the expenditure of surplus energy, helps organize emotions, or is a vehicle for learning. More importantly, as a mechanism, play is portrayed as the result of a causal process whereby external stimuli, especially through activities such as games or festivals, cause a subject to behave and experience these activities in a particular way. Under this view, play serves some purpose but its meaning is derived from causes external to the player. In other words, play has no meaning

in itself. The interest here focuses on the motivational force that precedes play. Consequently, play is empty.

On the other hand, intellectualist theories assume that the experience of play is entirely initiated by, and happens in the interiority of the player. To put it differently, for these theories, a pure consciousness transfers meaning from itself to an activity. The player gives meaning to play, but it is a meaning detached from any context.

Paraphrasing Merleau-Ponty, it is possible to say that in the empiricist notion there is nobody to play; in the intellectualist notion there is certainly a subject, but a thinking one, not a playing one. Empiricist as well as intellectualist views of play swing back and forth from interiority to exteriority, from consciousness to activity, from meaning to context, and vice versa making, unnecessarily so, these pairs of poles mutually exclusive. In short, these theories are based on dualisms categorically rejected by Merleau-Ponty. An analysis of play that hopes to enrich itself with the philosophical findings of Merleau-Ponty will have to provide a different account of the playful mode of being-in-the-world.

The theories of play that dichotomize or distance the subject from the world, that is theories which separate the player from the playground, miss the radical dynamic of play. Such theories fail to notice the fact that the genesis of play is, precisely, to be found in the articulating point between the player and the playground. In other words, those theoretical constructs lose track of human



being's primordial contact with the world. In order to penetrate this contact research "must return to the 'there is' which underlies it [the object-in-general]; to the site, the soil of the sensible and opened world such as it is in our life and for our body—not that possible body which we may legitimately think of as an information machine but that actual body I call mine" (1964c, p. 160).

Merleau-Ponty's theory of language, which Merleau-Ponty himself employed to refute empiricist and intellectualist notions and to return to people's primary contact with the world, is informative here. It is relevant to remember that for him words and thoughts *have* meaning. If the speaking word has the incarnation of thinking as its completion, play may also be understood in this light. In this sense, it can be said that play has meaning. In turn this will force my study to focus not on the world as a play site or playground that objectively appears in front of us. Nor will my skills or play-capabilities be seen as possessions to be called up and used in the objective playground. Rather the playing-subject will be approached as a person who plays while play potentialities and playground mutually condition one other. The genuine player is in a process where play-capabilities and playground construct each other. In this sense play may be seen as a kind of speaking word.

But just as every instance of expression is not, for Merleau-Ponty, an authentic one, neither will every instance of play be authentic. Only when play encourages the materialization of thinking rather than the mere recreation of already established significations it is possible to talk about rich or first order

play. When the second occurs, play does not incarnate an originary moment of play, but less powerful or second order play only.

Finally, Merleau-Ponty's idea that human existence is ambiguous is relevant to the mode of being at play. As in the speaking word, at play there is a lived sense of *immediate apprehended clarity*. Play, in the middle of the ambiguous world, open players to new horizons, landscapes that stretch the field of intentionalities, an opening that is so fragile that it tends to disappear when players go looking for it.

## Chapter 5

### Play: existence as first order speech

Many authors have recognized the value of play in keeping human existence fresh, interesting, and meaningful. However, almost the same number have noted how difficult it is to conceptualize play. Play is slippery and evasive. Indeed, play defies, and at times it seems to resist, precise and complete conceptualization. It might appear anytime, anywhere. Things are even further complicated when it is realized that as unpredictably as it shows up, play might vanish just as quickly.

The purpose of this chapter is to explore play as it is immediately experienced in the world. It could be said that this project is an attempt to describe the pre-predicative appearance of play. Toward this end, this chapter is divided into four sections. The first provides an account of the general characteristics of the phenomenon of play while the second relates those characteristics to Merleau-Ponty's notion of expression and first order speech. Section three ties the previous two together and explores the specific characteristics of play by way of two sets of personal experiences. In the final section, I summarize the whole chapter.

Following Maurice Merleau-Ponty's existential phenomenology, play will not be seen as a riddle to be solved but as a mysterious happening to be penetrated. It is mysterious because for Merleau-Ponty, total transparency, of

any style of being is never available. Because of this it will be impossible to reach final definitions. However, this does not mean that attempts to reach more enlightened understandings of the style of being at play are not commendable or useful. What Merleau-Ponty would do is warn about the inadequacy of approaches that simplify and objectify people's contact with the world. In this regard he said that "we must begin by reawakening the basic experience of the world of which science is the second-order expression" (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. viii).<sup>27</sup>

The recognition of human beings' inalienable engagement with the world, then, has to be the place from which to penetrate play understood as a synergy between player and playground. Merleau-Ponty's disavowal of subject-object or consciousness-world dualisms leaves humans in a dynamic, mutual interrelationship with the world. He said that "the body is our anchorage in a world" (1962, p. 144) and a "mediator to a world" (1962, p. 145). In one sense, the body, or the *body-subject* contrains people's mode of access to the world but, in another sense, the world depends on, and is only possible through body-subject capacities. The inseparability and intertwinedness of the body-subject and the world constitute people's being-in-the-world, which is human being's foundation of their existential dimension. Considering that commitment to the world, play has to be regarded in the world in which it appears. In doing so, there is a need to recognize that play is an experiential domain whose coming to be

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<sup>27</sup> Throughout this chapter I use four works by Merleau-Ponty. Therefore, hereafter, when quoting Merleau-Ponty I will provide the specific year and page citation in the texts.

constitutes a particular interpenetration of the body-subject and the world, that is, the player and the playground. This means, paraphrasing Merleau-Ponty, that play is a unique unfolding of the project toward the world that people are. In other words, play is a manner of existing.

### **5.1 Play: general characteristics**

I agree with many of the authors reviewed in chapter 2 and accept two major claims about play, albeit with some reservations. First, I take play to be a way of approaching and unfolding in the world rather than a particular event or activity, or set of events or activities. This orientation or way of being-in-the-world is autotelic. That is, play, as a manner of comportment, is not interested in the gains that might potentially come from it but rather with intrinsic values and ends. As Kretchmar aptly put it, “with one blow, play breaks the means-ends calculus of slavery and prudent thinking” (Kretchmar, 1992, p. 4). Second, I also accept the notion that play necessarily involves and is a product of two moments: a disposed player and an inviting playground. At play, players and playgrounds form intrinsically valued and dynamic totalities.

Play, then, is a way of encountering the world that includes a willing player and an inviting playground, where the value of the activity is experienced as intrinsic to itself. However, I do not take this notion of play to be a discrete structure that can be used as a sort of objective measure to determine whether

my participation in any event or activity does or does not constitute a legitimate instance of play. Rather, I believe that this conception of play is only useful if it is taken as a starting point to explore the way people actually experience play. Since there is a wide spectrum of lived play experiences, an appropriate recognition of people's irreducible and original perspective while at play requires more than the use of such abstract categories as autotelicity and player-playground convergence.

In other words, the mere application of the play label to situations that from a third person standpoint, seem to be play but are not experienced as such does not substantially further the understanding of the phenomenon. In fact, that operation, which favors an objective perspective abstracted from the subjective, misses important details of the directions in which I intend the world at play. For example, from an objective point of view—one that recognizes autotelicity—painting an apartment is typically regarded as a chore or duty. Such painting would seem to have little to do with autotelicity. But the last time I renovated my apartment I found myself in an autotelic spirit while mixing colors, choosing brushes, and trying different painting equipment and techniques. The development of third person abstractions such as autotelicity for identifying play are useful but severely limited strategies, for they move away from people's immediate experiences of play. The autotelic character of this phenomenon may not make full sense logically or objectively, but it does as a distinction that is lived

and enjoyed in the flesh toward the world. In short, autotelicity comes alive by virtue of the way people experience their involvement in an event or activity.

Autotelicity happens in instrumentally as well as in intrinsically valued ventures. The experience of flip-flopping between lived instances of autotelicity and exotelicity is a common one. Play is, then, not to be found in a priori determinations of instrumental or frivolous endeavors but in experienced instances of autotelicity. The issue of play here has nothing to do with the reduction and simplification of those instances into manipulable categories. On the contrary, play refers to the fleshy and messy ways in which autotelicity comes alive in the interplay between a potential player and a possible playground.

The notion of play at hand does not suggest that play is the convergence of players and playgrounds as two objective and autonomous poles. In fact, lived experiences of play are much richer and delicate modes of living the world than that, for they are only made possible by the dynamic and intricate ways in which these two poles constantly interpenetrate and affect each other. Play is not a product of either the player or the playground, but their fundamental unity and reciprocity. Recognizing that play is neither the simple effect of an exterior stimuli (the playground) nor a mere internal production (the player) but a particular style of living a dialogue between the body-subject and the world is an important step in penetrating to a more fundamental level the ways in which the body-subject is immediately aware of the autotelic intoxication of play.

Having discussed the sense in which I take play to be a mode of existing in the world that is autotelic in nature, and before proceeding to explore and illuminate its distinctive lived characteristics, I want to briefly focus on some of play's general features. The latter are shared with other orientations towards the world and are based on the insights of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy studied in the previous chapter. However, because these general features are usually overlooked in the study of play, I believe that it is important to lay them out. Moreover, they provide a clue for penetrating the uniqueness of play. The three issues, which are related to the originality of perceptual experience, are the existential, intentional, and expressive character of play. Let consider each one of them in the light of Merleau-Ponty's theory of perception.

Merleau-Ponty's theory of perception is very important for my understanding of play as a way of being-in-the-world. Perception is for Merleau-Ponty people's primary and fundamental access to the world prior to, and accepted without, any reflective operation. He said that perception is "defined as access to truth" (1962, p. xvi) and that "the world is what we perceive" (1962, p. xvi). This privileged opening to the world constitutes a way into truth in that it does not allow for a more basic understanding of our being-in-the-world. In terms of play, his theory of perception requires, while experiencing play, a focus on "the opened world such as it is in our life and for our body" (1964c, p. 160). Perception refers to the immediate apprehension of meaning through people's always already bodily attachment to the world. Every perception, and



consequently every instance of play, corresponds to the body-subject determining but also being determined by its dwelling in the world.

If perception, and play, manifest the original dialog of an incarnated consciousness with its surroundings, then, it has to be deemed as existential. It is important here to notice that in its existential character play is also always intentional in the sense that meaningful apprehensions happen in a center-background gestalt. That is, as a form of perception, play highlights an element or set of elements within the vagueness of the perceptual field so this centrality comes to possess a special structure of meaning.

What the above discussion reveals is that as an existential mode of being-in-the-world play is clearly a function of the body-subject. To be precise, play reaffirms people's bodily character in the world. More importantly, play involves a meaningful structurization of the background, i.e. the playground, in which it happens. The center-background gestalt is not imposed on the player but has a dynamic co-source in the player herself. Players begin to play when they co-determine, co-structure their playground in an autotelic spirit. The playground is not something rigid and predetermined waiting to be acted upon. Nor are players sources of absolute freedom in shaping an infinitely malleable environment. On the contrary, players themselves make play by co-configuring the playground. In other words, play happens when people's playing bodies enter into playgrounds. But, at the same time, all the ways in which playgrounds and their conditions are

available to players are radically connected with and affected by their playing subject-bodies.

Play is constituted in a process that occurs at the level of the body-subject, a level prior to consciousness. Players are aware of their playing before any act of reflection. This is concordant with Merleau-Ponty's claim that "the world is not what I think, but what I live through" (1962, p. xvi-xvii). Play is not a simple reflection but a meaningful happening that deeply touches human beings. Because of that there is a need to turn to the spontaneous emergence of play in the world. Merleau-Ponty's existential phenomenology and his analysis of expression provide an avenue for discovering play as lived expression instead of reflective achievement.

Expressive life, then, is another realization of the body-subject's engagement with the world. Indeed, expression discloses this mutual determination and constitutes a kind of intentionality. For Merleau-Ponty, of course, expression is existential. He believed that expression is as unavoidable as is our intertwinedness with the world. He said that "we never remain suspended in nothingness. We are always in a plenum, in being, just as a face, even in repose, even in death, is always doomed to express something" (1962, p. 452). It is just as impossible to temporarily shut down the world as it is to momentarily repress or suspend expression.

The preeminence that Merleau-Ponty gives to expressive life has to be seriously considered in the study of play. If every manifestation of the dialectical

relationship between the body-subject and the world includes an expressive dimension, then, play as a mode of being-in-the-world has to be expressive in some way. The interaction between the player and the playground in constituting play is always already expressive. As an existential happening, expression finds itself in and through play. It is possible to say that human existence in play is condemned to expression. However, that all realizations of play are expressive in nature does not mean that every expressive instance in life, is play. To put it differently, expression is a condition for play but play is not a condition for expression. A further exploration of Merleau-Ponty's understanding of expression will reveal which instantiations of expression are play. A particular mode of expression, of being-in-the-world, emerges in play. What players express, as will be seen, varies from other modes of expression.

## **5.2 Play, expression and first order speech**

“Expression is not one of the curiosities that the mind may propose to examine but is its existence in act” (1964b, p. 79). This shows that for Merleau-Ponty expression takes its significance in the context in which it happens because it never occurs in a vacuum. More importantly, the notion that expression constitutes itself as such in the very expressive act points towards the lived experience of expression, that is “what is expressed is always inseparable from it [expression]” (1962, p. 391). Expression, in other words, is self-contained.

The body-subject understands the means of expression, i.e. language, the world, and what is being expressed in the very enactment of the expressive act.

There is always the temptation to consider language as if it were a simple instrument to be used in order to carry out a motive outside itself, e.g. a pre-existing purpose. However, for Merleau-Ponty that is not possible because verbal and non-verbal modes of expression cannot be isolated from the content of expression. Ideas and meanings cannot be understood secluded from thinking. As we have already seen in the previous chapter, for phenomenology, ideas and meanings constitute an indivisible unity. In this sense, language represents the completion of thinking. Merleau-Ponty illustrated the point saying that words “must somehow cease to be a way of designating things or thoughts, and become the presence of that thought in the phenomenal world, and moreover, not its clothing but its token or its body” (1962, p. 182). For him expression, language, is rooted in human beings’ corporeal condition. It is only in the facticity of the body-subject that meanings find their manifestation. Using Merleau-Ponty’s words it can be said that expression is a symbol of a certain relationship to being.

As a consequence of the preceding remarks it is possible to argue that play, as an expressive phenomenon, refers to the articulating point between the player and the playground and, consequently, its material conditions. The meaning of play, as any other manifestation of expressive life, is found in the material unfolding of playing and not somewhere else. Play is only contained in

playing. Therefore, play involves thought and is the concretization of thinking. Merleau-Ponty's main thesis shows that there is a radical connection between thinking and speaking, which in turn refers to the embodied character of thought. For play, then, there is no autotelic meaning that is complete and pre-existent awaiting expression in the actions of play. Rather, autotelic delight completes itself as the verbal and non-verbal actions of play transpires. Play is an unfolding of autotelic, self-contained thinking.

The self-containedness of play as an expressive phenomenon may be a clue to understand why it has long been regarded as an occurrence that is extraordinary, special and unique, one that possesses its proper spatio-temporal boundaries and constitutes a different reality. These ascribed characteristics may be related to the account that Merleau-Ponty offered of the *speaking subject*. For him, to emphasize it once again, thinking is synonymous with speaking, where speaking simply refers to expression in general because, as he himself affirmed, there are silent as well as loud modes of expression. Thought becomes so in speaking. However, not all speaking acts bear the same significance. Play, then, may be seen as one kind of speaking act.

Merleau-Ponty said that "successful expression frees what has always been held captive in being" (1964b, p. 96) and that expression "is not for us speaking subjects a second-order operation we supposedly have recourse to only in order to communicate our thoughts to others, but our own taking possession or acquisition of significations which otherwise are present to us only

in a muffled way” (1964b, p. 90). The reference to *successful expression* manifests the difference between instances of speech that are identical with thinking and those that merely reproduce sedimented systems of meanings.

The distinction uncovers a gradation in the depth and authenticity of expression. For example, “the meaning of what the artist [the speaking subject] is going to say *does not exist* anywhere—not in things, which as yet have no meaning, nor in the artist [the speaking subject] himself, in his unformulated life” (1964a, p. 19). For Merleau-Ponty the coming into being of a significant intention constitutes successful expression. Any means of expression that falls short of the latter simply reproduce established meanings and do not form an instance of speaking in the fullest sense. The speaking subject is one who expresses herself successfully because she actualizes thinking.

Merleau-Ponty made this gradation explicit through a categorization of speaking. As noted, he distinguished between a second order speech “which renders a thought already acquired” (1962, p. 389) and first order speech “which brings it [thought] into existence” (1962, p. 389). The former repeats words that have been fixed in common usage and have become objectified abstractions. In spite of its rigid character, second order speech permits people to have a world, which can be inexhaustibly transformed through the spring of first order speech.

Unlike second order speech, first order speech does not illustrate a preconceived thought, a prepackaged idea that awaits actualization but successfully embodies a thought that has never seen the light before. The

speaking subject, one who lives in first order speech, incarnates the full power of expression. This means that the body-subject unfolds new and creative coherences, which by necessity implicate old ones, because expressions of first order do not come from nowhere. They come from existing configurations. However, the novel arrangements were not completely fixed in available thoughts. The speaking subject, then, is a giver of meaning who can manifest herself as such in every human project. The world in its totality and as a universe of latent possibilities can transform the subject into a speaking subject. Alternatively, the world can also be transformed by the speaking subject at anytime. To summarize, it might be said that to speak in the fullest sense, to be a successfully expressive subject, constitutes the crafting of new avenues to access the world.

Merleau-Ponty's notion of the speaking subject is relevant for play. People have all tasted the extraordinary character of play—a uniqueness that confers on it its preferential status. If the phenomenon of play and its extraordinariness is to be grasped, there is a need to see what it discloses as an expressive way of being-in-the-world. This means an appreciation of the speaking subject rather than an effort whose aim is the objectification of play. Any attempt to objectify play, apart from the unfolding expression it embodies, would be futile. If play were a constituted language, that is second order speech, it would be an easy subject for explicitation. More importantly, if play were simply a secondary mode of expression it would not only be transparent but intentionally

repeatable as well. This would make it ordinary in relation to thinking—existence. This is not to deny that second order speech occupies a role in the emergence of play. Usually, the reenactment of established meanings and cultural patterns takes people away from the ordinary world and predisposes them to the play mood. The value of second order speech resides in its predisposing or *warming up* character. These considerations require considering play as an expressive phenomenon that manifest and incarnate original acts of speech.

Considering play as instantiations of first order speech, successful expression, allows people to make sense of the avowed distinctive character of play. Human beings at play live a *different reality* to the extent that the coming into being of a new signification embodies creation in the sense of transforming available meanings. Because the new signification coming into being has never been uttered before, it simply lived in its unfolding moment. It is in this sense that play is totally concerned with itself. The mutual dependency and determination of the player and the playground manifests an instance of originary speech when this articulation marks a foundational change in people's openness to the world. Play, to put it differently, alters the means of expression in which it is manifested and affirmed.

This investigation of play as originary acts of speaking discloses the transformation of the player's playground while taking it up as it is. However, it is not only the playground that gets transformed but the player herself as well. This



reciprocity lies precisely at the core of play as speaking in the fullest sense, for experiencing play is living the birth of a new thought, which allows other novel instances of play to be born without having the intention of crafting the new thought. If the player were to initiate play unilaterally, she would be merely using one symbolic gesture among the stock of available symbols and engaging herself in an intellectual operation that distances these symbols from speaking. On the contrary, the experience of play as an act of originary expression captures the drama of its emergence in the immediacy of the new meaning. In a sense play *surprises* the player. Merleau-Ponty said that the very word that I voice sometimes "surprise[s] me myself and teach[es] me my thought" (1964b, p. 88). That vivid awareness of the scope of the player and the playground mutual determination as the embodiment of an authentic thought constitute play.

Efforts to explicitly possess or bring about the lived signification of play are doomed to fail. When people play they are too busy expressing themselves in an originary way to recognize how it came up. However, to the extent that people's play has meaning, they are aware of how *different* they are. Because play surprises players, they do not fully know how it emerges. However, paraphrasing Merleau-Ponty, it is in the actual practice of playing that people learn to understand and recognize play. Due to its mysteriousness, players can only aspire to understand, in the sense of experiencing play qualities, and recognize play. Unfortunately, the possibility of calling up play on command is not available to us because play is not a product and, more importantly, "what one too

deliberately seeks, he does not find” (1964b, p. 83). The experienced spontaneous arrival of play confirms the latter.

Play as first order speech is a spontaneity, which teaches us what cannot be known in any other way except through playing. Human beings *learn* to play only through playing. However, the fact that play animates itself and cannot be reproduced at will does not prevent people from penetrating its experience. To the description of the lived experience of play—better to say players’ living play—as an act of speaking in the fullest sense I now direct my attention.

### **5.3 Play: lived characteristics**

I want to illuminate some of play’s distinctive characteristics in detail by considering the following two sets of personal experiences. I believe that they are reasonably common experiences. From them I will explore what is different about being at play and how people experience it as the manifestation and incarnation of an original expressive act.

Scenario 1: It is a sunny day in State College, Pennsylvania. A group of around twenty people rush to a nearby golf course. However, they are not getting ready for a round of golf but to improvise a football pitch to continue what has become a tradition for them: Wednesday lunch hour football pick up games. Teams are simply divided by the color of the jerseys people are wearing while back packs and ice chests serve as goals. No goal or sidelines can be seen

anywhere. But despite the simplicity of the pitch, the magic kingdom of football is beginning to announce itself in its full splendor. I answer the seductive call. The football is rolling and its movements capture me. I am aware of my teammates' and rivals' location, the unusual dryness of the grass and the imaginary agreed upon limits of the field. Today, I not only adjust myself to these conditions but seem to anticipate people's intentions as well. The dialogue I establish with the football world opens football avenues I have never visited before. I intuit these meaningful football sites and am able to successfully traverse them. The experience is complex for, on the one hand, I see the new paths opening, but, on the other hand, I constitute them while implementing and unfolding my football skills. The experience of recognition and construction intoxicates me during the whole game. This afternoon I can generate and solve football problems as if I have eyes in the back of my head. It is difficult to know where these novel football invitations are born because, even though the field presents them, it is through and in me that they become a reality. I feel that the skills and tricks I employ surprise me in a fluid and ecstatic way. It seems as if I attract the football to make it an extension of my being.

Scenario 2: It is a beautiful summer evening in Buenos Aires, Argentina during one of my annual visits to the country. My longtime neighborhood friends arrange a football match with a team from a nearby neighborhood. The field looks immaculate, and the good lightning gives an air of importance to the ambiance. Completing an already impressive picture, both teams wear brand

new jerseys. The kingdom of football is dressed for the best of occasions. Without any hesitancy or resistance I step into it. But the initial excitement soon vanishes for me. The rivals, as well as my teammates, have developed their football skills in a way that allows them to live in a football dimension that is unknown to me. As the game progresses, the distance that separates them from me grows larger and larger, and I soon become a repetitious, mechanical football player. I am lost to the point of being afraid of making mistakes. While I perceive my football capacities as predictable and unusually rudimentary, everybody else on the field appears to be living in what I take to be high speed football. These people are traversing football spaces that my feet do not recognize and cannot access. Of course I can respond to some of these football uncertainties but I am not able to live them as mine. I see them as objective paths outside of my zone of influence. Yes, I contribute to my team's success, but my football skills are simple and standard, and by no means impressive. I enjoy being with my friends, the struggle for victory and the thrill of an intense exercise but the type of communion with football I have known is absent tonight. In a sense, the feeling is one of being controlled by football rather than being in harmony with it.

Scenario 3: It is 8:15 in the morning of an already warm day in late August. The place is full with a mix of excited, incredulous, and sleepy looks. This is the first day of class of an upper division college course on the Ethics of Sport. There are about twenty students in the classroom. As expected of any instructor, I introduce myself and my background, give a brief overview of the

course, my expectations, the kind of work that will be involved and what I hope the class will accomplish. Of course, I also hand out the course syllabus. To demonstrate the kind of issues and activities students will encounter during the term, and to set the tone for the rest of the semester, I propose to discuss whether or not society should expect professional athletes to be positive role models.

The students find the topic interesting; I tell them that it has produced considerable controversy. They spontaneously form two groups based on their arguments. One side holds the view that professional athletes should set moral examples. The other side rejects the idea. Although I have not planned it, I have improvised a class debate. I ask the students to identify those who share their position in this topic to form two groups. The class seems chaotic for a couple of minutes while they do so. I give the groups ten minutes to identify arguments in order to support and defend their positions in the debate.

I am taken by the discussion. And, as I moderate the debate, I find myself considering aspects of this complex issue that I have barely noticed before. I suddenly realize that the end of class time is approaching, so I decide to summarize the debate. I also relate the rich discussion to the course objectives, the acquisition of knowledge and skills, and my expectations . . . after all this is the first day of class! A meeting that I thought would be informative, simple and monotonous turns out to be complex, stimulating, and challenging.

Scenario 4: Again it is 8:15 in the morning but today is cold and snowy. It is November. Although I have been meeting the Ethics of Sport class for almost three months, the classroom still presents the same number of excited and incredulous faces as on the first day of class. This is no coincidence since many students have declared themselves to be relativists of some sort or another. The topic scheduled for the class is the so-called good or intentional foul. My lesson plan includes two parts: a brief lecture and a follow-up discussion.

I begin my lecture by providing a conceptual framework that will facilitate the understanding of the topic at hand and generate a meaningful discussion. To check if the point of my exposition has been conveyed I ask the students a couple of questions in relation to the assigned reading for the day. Unfortunately, I realize that the students do not know the facts and details of the reading. Thinking on my feet, I modify the lesson plan and ask the students to pair up, go over the text, and relate it to the main points of the lecture. After a while I try again to engage the class in a dialogue. But we are not having a good day; no one, including myself, is caught up in the conceptual framework presented in the lecture nor in the good or intentional foul. And I thought the latter was a poignant topic! Time goes by slowly as I become once again, without willing it to be so, the center of focus. I interpret the material and unsuccessfully attempt to find a way to nudge students toward their own explanations and conclusions. I labor the rest of the class; it is neither academically provocative nor stimulating. I was prepared to travel the interesting intellectual alleys and byways that students in

this class often identify, but I am leaving the classroom asking what went wrong today. It was tiresome.

Traditionally people would consider me to be playing in the two football scenarios and working in both classroom encounters. This is so because many regard football as both a play setting and an organized form of play, while teaching is accepted as an environment where instrumentality and productivity prevail. From an objective point of view I am considered, and expected, to be intending football in an autotelic spirit and teaching in an exotelic mood. However, taking into account my general remarks on play, I consider myself to be playing in the first scenario of each of the two sets of experiential contrasts described. The experience of play is one in which whatever a person is involved in is lived and regarded as its own reward. Whether the initial intention to be involved in an activity or event was instrumental or intrinsic is not determinative of the experience of play. In this regard, both the world of football and the world of teaching have proven to be for me fertile terrain in which to live the uniqueness of play, albeit temporarily.

The lived sense of autotelicity I have been stressing has surprised me, and also deserted me, in football pitches as well as classrooms. I have been in and out of play while striving for football excellence and teaching effectiveness. Play is an autotelic expressive enterprise that manifests and incarnates original acts of speech. Sometimes first order speech shows up; sometimes it does not.

I take the first scenarios of my two sets of descriptions as paradigmatic instances of autotelic unfolding in the world in the mode of first order speech. First, in those moments I have been taken by the invitations coming from the environment. In the case of football my predisposition to accept the play invitation was in place once I saw the football pitch. On the other hand, in the case of teaching I was not well predisposed to play; in fact I was not even looking for its appearance, and it took me a while to recognize and accept the play call. Whether the predisposition to play was present from the beginning or not, the play invitations coming from the playgrounds were potent enough to produce an irresistible sense of attraction to and a feeling of sheer absorption by them.

However, in both cases, football and teaching, the play opportunities arose as I simultaneously complemented them. That is, I immediately apprehended those opportunities while constructing and maintaining them within my area of effective influence. For example, I intuited different *football cracks* in the opposing defense that *invited* me to try skillful ways to penetrate them. I attempted to do so by either crafting solo runs or putting teammates in scoring positions through precise assists. In the former instances the football seemed to shrink under my feet into a very small object that could be hidden so my opponents did not have access to it; in the latter cases the football grew bigger and brighter for my teammates to find it and, possibly, score. Similarly, the first class of my Ethics of Sport course offered unexpected teaching situations that merited receptivity, rapid decision-making, and materialization. I perceived that a



debate would fit the students' enthusiasm and arranged it. Taken by a rapture of lived autotelic discussion I grasped, with the students several, interesting intellectual pathways to follow.

Undoubtedly, during the previous examples, I was aware of the football and teaching vistas opened to me; it was the dynamic and complexity of the football pitch and the classroom that allowed them to appear. These situations called upon me and required me to try alternatives. In doing so, I also called upon the playgrounds' possibilities. As I spontaneously answered to the new vistas, I confirmed them through my skills and materialized approaches to football and teaching that I had not considered before. In a sense, I became my playground and *took on* more of it. The explicitation of this double operation of simultaneously being called by a playground's qualities and calling upon them through bodily skills is all that matters while people play. Playgrounds test players and players test their playgrounds. Because of the specifics of the playgrounds with which players interact, players are forever evolving players (habitualized, skilled, historicized, etc.); and because players are forever evolving, players continue to meet new playgrounds. The dynamic testing can start in either pole but both have to be not only present but also satisfactorily strong to keep the unity self-sufficient.

While at play, nothing outside this dynamic distracts the player. In the case of the lunch football game it was as if the game was tailored for me. As the game suits me, my skills not only matched the life of the game but also allowed

me to make an even more intrinsically meaningful project out of it. At the end, I was tailoring the game through my skills. Likewise, the improvisations in my first meeting with the Ethics of Sport class were appropriate for the students as a consequence of the invitations they provided by way of their uttered interest in the discussion. Play includes a lived self-sufficiency and the convergence of player and playground in a way that original modes of unfolding in the latter are experienced.

These introductory comments to the lived experience of play do not make the whole of the distinction. I notice that in play situations the world is apprehended in a kind of mobile intimation and reciprocity that breaks the lived ambiguity inherent to the world. I also regard play as a complete instance of abrupt expression in which the world is interrogated and the playground interrogates the player in a unique way. Finally, I see play as carrying a special appeal, a meaning that is at the same time received and constructed. This meaning is taken by the player as belonging and projected in a culture. I want now to clarify and explore in detail these three aspects of the experience of play under the ideas of Merleau-Ponty. I respectively call these aspects *a tension between ambiguity and unambiguity*; *the confluence of inspiration, interrogation and the 'I can'*; and *a movement towards meaning and culture*.

### **5.3.1 Play: a tension between ambiguity and unambiguity**

The lived experience of play conjugates what appears to be two distinct and opposite realities: ambiguity and unambiguity. When the experience of play surprises people, it is not clear where it will take them or how it will end up. Moreover, it is difficult, if possible at all, to recognize the origin of the experience. What people know is that they are just enjoying the autotelic intoxication of play. I suggest that at play people do not literally transcend the ambiguity in which, as I have shown in the previous chapter, they are always caught in the world but project and experience themselves in the world in a fundamental and delightful unity. To describe this unity I will refer to the emergence of play and Merleau-Ponty's notion that in every manner of being in the world ambiguity prevails. I believe that while people are at play the world is not lived as ambiguous.

The experience of play as an instance in which thinking is materialized brings a sense of being born to our being-in-the-world. While at play, players find themselves embodying the coming into being of significations that are never conceived of before they occur. For example, when I am intrinsically taken by football, the tricks come to me in a curious, almost effortless way, as if I do not plan on creating them. In this regard, and referring to the expressiveness of the famous French painter Paul Cézanne, Merleau-Ponty said that throughout his life Cézanne incarnated "the birth of order through spontaneous organization" (1964a, p. 13). To the extent that my unpredictable football tricks and Cézanne's painting did not repeat any pre-established arrangement but presented

themselves as an order which originated precisely in and through themselves, Cézanne and I were in deep play. In other words, these examples manifest the spontaneous and mysterious emergence of play as authentic expression.

Paraphrasing Merleau-Ponty it can be said that if play is conceptualized and sought in isolation from playing not only its mystery and spontaneity are missed but its surprising character as well. Cézanne's creations and my effortless embodiment of football tricks exemplify how precariously play is achieved. Humans are so influenced by their residence in sedimented orders that it is difficult to let spontaneity give birth to novel and meaningful expressive organizations. In this respect play is neither repetition nor something manufactured to meet the player's interests, needs, or expectations. Rather, play as a foundational change in people's openness to the world has no fixed script and is not predictable.

Merleau-Ponty had something to say in this regard in relation to the unpredictable character of expression. "Expression" he said "is like a step taken in the fog—no one can say where, if anywhere, it will lead" (1964a, p. 3). Since play is the instantiation of expression in the fullest sense, it is not the manifestation of a transparent thought because such thoughts are those that have been made fully explicit in the past. At play, the individual is open to the multitude of available but blurred and viscous paths in the world. As mentioned, humans are steeped in ambiguity. Since humans' primal condition of being-in-the-world is always already intertwined with the world surrounding them, it is not

possible to fully and clearly demarcate the origin and meaning of appearing phenomena. People's dwelling in the world produces a *chiaroscuro* that gets violated if clear-cut or mechanical demarcations are attempted.

As a coming into being of a new signification, play emerges from people's direct and equivocal relationship with the world. The relationship between player and playground admits no clear demarcation of where the cause of play resides, what affects what, or how much of the playground is *in* the player and how much of the players is *in* the playground. Play's ambiguity resides in the fact that neither pole—that represented by the player or one provided by the playground—completely influences or subsumes play under its influences. On the contrary, the player as well as the playground always contribute in a fluctuating manner to the emergence of play. This dialectic of ambiguity resonates in the experience of play as a form of expression in which the player does not know where she is heading although she has a tacit awareness of the birth of a new order.

Although play as first order speech has an obscure beginning and development, and can never be approached in isolation from the ambiguity in which people find themselves in the world, it does not mean that the experience of play is dominated by confusion or lack of meaning. Play as the concretization of thinking begins in the simultaneity in which the player and the playground conform a lived unity. This unity is dominated neither by the interiority nor the exteriority of the player. In other words, that point of concurrence engulfs both

the player and the playground and allows the birth of a new signification that transcends ambiguity.

At play not only traditional dualisms such as subject-object, interiority-exteriority, or consciousness-body collapse and ambiguity loses its relevance but there also arises a tacit and fundamental expressive coexistence between the player and the playground. Merleau-Ponty regarded those instances as “miracle[s] of an immediate apprehended clarity” in which “I understand myself and am understood quite unambiguously” (1962, p. 391). To play is to experience the concretization of thinking as a meaningful whole amidst a world shrouded by ambiguity.

Of course, play is an instance of unambiguity only for the one who is playing; “it becomes obscure as soon as we try to bring explicitly to light those reasons which have led us to understand thus and not otherwise” (1962, p. 391). This simply means that people’s ambiguous acts are lived as transparent while at play. But they become blurred again as people attempt to establish a causal relationship between player and playground. In doing so we return to the traditional categories, which during play were irrelevant, impotent, and not at all meaningful.

Merleau-Ponty aptly described instances of the aforementioned lived rupture of ambiguity in which what has never been said is precisely announced in the world for the first time. In relation to Cézanne’s frequent enactment of first order speech Merleau-Ponty declared that the painter “wrote in painting what had

never yet been painted” (1964a, p. 17). Cézanne himself described that experience saying that the painting “thinks itself in me and I am its consciousness” (1964a, p. 17). More generally but also in relation to experienced moments of authentic expression Merleau-Ponty said that “to the extent that what I say has meaning, I am a different ‘other’ for myself when I am speaking; and to the extent that I understand, I no longer know who is speaking and who is listening” (1964b, p. 97).

The coming together of the player and the playground in an instance of clarity brings about a new focus in life. The meaning of play lies in the appearance and apprehension of a sense of radical unity as human beings unfold the project towards the world that they inhabit in novel ways. At play human beings exist in expressive clarity.

The immediate grasp of unambiguity within the obscurity of reality distinguishes play from other modes of existing in the world. The simultaneity of embodying and understanding a new coherence, the autotelic lived impossibility of discriminating what is being created from who is creating constitutes the *otherness* or *extraordinariness* of play. Play is different because under its aura the player frees a new order but at the same time incarnates that order. In relation to painting, Merleau-Ponty called this radical undiscernability the enigma of the painter’s vision as a continued birth (1964c, pp. 162-169). Regardless of the realm of life in which it happens—painting, poetry, football, teaching, or music—at play a transformative living unity between the player and the

playground is born. That is why at play people liberate something new that simultaneously liberates them. The being of people who are at play is an *inspired* being, one that is totally unconcerned with any instrumental way of thinking and astonished with her unambiguous expressive unfolding in the world. This double liberation is the way people grow toward and in autotelic freedom.

### **5.3.2 Play: the confluence of interrogation, inspiration, and the *I can***

The experience of play as an instance of speaking in the fullest sense in which there is a radical unity between the player and the playground also encapsulates a tacit questioning of the world. However, that interrogative operation is only disclosed in and through the very manifestation of an authentic thought while people live the ephemeral delicacy of autotelicity. Merleau-Ponty described the manifestation of authenticity in terms of an *inspired* painter whose *I can* or thinking possibilities incarnates a unique style. Although he did not explicitly refer to the issue of play, his words are very pertinent to my study. He said that,

The painter at work knows nothing about the antithesis of man and the world, of signification and the absurd, of style and “representation.” He is far too busy expressing his communication with the world to become proud of a style which is born almost as if he were unaware of it (1964b, pp. 53-54).



While at play, the player does not realize the exploration that is taking place in and by itself but through the *answers* she unexpectedly encounters. Of course, those answers are nothing else than the enactment of a significative intention. The style of being referred to by Merleau-Ponty indicates the taking up and following of a direction of the world made available as the player interrogates the playground and vice versa through her playing-body tendencies. Nonetheless, the sense of questioning that allows the discovery and confirmation of a direction in the playground gets lost in the interpenetration of the player and the playground. This is why players suddenly find answers they were not aware they were pursuing.

In my football and teaching scenarios of play, for example, I was not explicitly searching for any specific response and, in a sense, the interrogation going on faded behind the absorption provided by the changing conditions of the game and the classroom. However, I found football tricks and teaching methods that I had not even considered as being in my area of influence or as potential possibilities. As with the ambiguity-unambiguity simultaneity, the player does not explore the playground through questions that are lived as such, but rather gets lost in them to find—or, more precisely, embody—instances of speaking in the fullest sense made possible precisely by the mutual interrogation. The questioning is tacitly lived and makes possible a kind of inspiration. While the interrogation becomes tacit, the player *forgets* the interrogating operation and the delight of play is possible.

Here, once again, the words of Merleau-Ponty's can be used to establish that play promotes its own oblivion. For example, and in relation to the issue of interrogation, I can follow the rules of football and try my best during a game which by necessity implies testing, a kind of interrogation, of the field, my abilities, the opponents' skills, etc.; however, from the moment I am caught up in the meaning of football and find my style and skills, I lose sight of what the interrogation entails to simply apprehend the clarity of my first order expression. In a sense, when the explicit questioning becomes tacit in an instance of play, I am an inspired project toward football.

An "inspired man had the gift of tongues" (1964c, p. 165) said Merleau-Ponty. The selection of the term inspiration to describe first order speech is neither fortuitous nor inconsequential. Inspiration refers to the intake of air, to that which gives life but also to that which is needed to live. For Merleau-Ponty "the word [inspiration] should be taken literally. There really is inspiration and expiration of Being" (1964c, p. 167). When play arises there is an actualization of thinking that gives birth to something that has not yet been formulated. A player is an inspired being to the extent that she frees a new thought in a moment of lived autotelic transparency. At play, then, the player breathes out an instance of speech that is concurrent with thinking. The player possesses the gift of tongues.

In the preceding section I established that play allows the player to take a new stance toward life in so far as the player unambiguously lives the

simultaneous freedom and incarnation of a new thought. In my playing-teaching situation this is seen when I encounter a solution to an unforeseen situation that is only made real as I propose an unexpected teaching method. That description can be complemented by adding that the coming into being of an original act of expression brings on its back a tacit interrogation of the playground. Indeed, the unfolding of an innovative expression is only possible by that questioning. In a sense, players get inspired, albeit abruptly and unexpectedly, give birth, and find themselves “endowed with new organs” (1964b, p. 52) after having lost themselves in the labyrinthical question mark of the playground.

The fact that the player encounters multiple invitations from the playground explains the lived dimension of a materialization of a novelty that is not guided by any script and leads itself to no pre-determined destination. Playgrounds are full of latent possibilities which never have absolute unequivocal significations and provoke the aforementioned interrogation. For their part, players are not tied to any particular perspective. Rather, they constitute a field of potentialities—one that is never fixed. The moment in which the player and the playground compose a living unity in which the player traverses the interrogation opened up by the playground, liberating and incarnating a coherence out of what has been so far lifeless and uninteresting, play emerges. This coming into being of a unique signification is possible by forgetting the interrogation. At play, the player confirms a direction of the playground while the playground confirms the player’s mode of access to that direction through her

playing-body. Play is a mutual confirmation materialized in the player's experienced expansion of her thinking potential.

It is important to remember that for Merleau-Ponty thinking—the *cogito*—is not a product of a detached consciousness but the consequence of the revelation of one's being as a being always already immersed in the world. In this respect, thinking is grounded and projected into the world and has a carnal character. Therefore, the coming to be of a new signification “does not arise from the ‘I think’ but from the ‘I am able to’” (1964b, p. 88). In other words, the play inspiration that allows coining speaking words “is marked upon the map of the ‘I can’” (1964c, p. 162). Play is a mode of being-in-the-world, which permits the player to stretch what she is capable of unfolding in the playground.

The emergence of play is lived as a power to give meaning to the unity formed by players and playgrounds. Because of the existential nature of play, players can only access their playgrounds through their limited body-subjects and skills. Indeed, playgrounds depend on and are made possible by way of the body-subjects that players are. On the other hand, due to the players' intertwinedness with their playgrounds, the former come to be so because of the potentialities made available by the latter. In it is this sense that play is experienced as the concretization of a new possibility between the player's body-subject and the playground's invitations. This possibility is only permitted by an exploration that is cancelled out in that process. I become my playground influenced by habits and skills, and then live from them to a surprisingly new

playground. The coming to be of this original way of *thinking* resides in the body-subject, in the players' hands, in their tongues or in their feet. When, for example, in the middle of a team handball match a participant experiences that her "hand is not simply [a] part of the body, but the expression and continuation of a thought," (1964a, p. 18) she possesses the gift of a new hand. She dynamically liberates and incarnates a handball meaning never unfolded before. She was just playing.

### **5.3.3 Play: a movement towards meaning and culture**

I have said that the synergy between the player and the playground constitutive of play is lived as the synchronic liberation and incarnation of original meanings. In other words, the player frees a meaning that at the same time earns manifestation through the player's body-subject. It is precisely in the lived expanded mode of the player's body-subject *I can* that a new signification is made visible. The surprising aspect of this rather complex phenomenon, in which expression cannot be detached from what is being expressed and is never a bridge behind which the player encounters or through which she infers meaning, is its immediately apprehended clarity.

Play, as the embodiment of original acts of expression, of whatever kind, has a meaning in itself and is self-sufficient. No exterior agency confers on play its significance. Merleau-Ponty referred to this kind of meaning in relation to

painting. He said that painting, and for this matter any other instance of original expression, “is sufficient unto itself and closed in upon its intimate signification” (1964b, p. 79). However, the self-sufficiency of play has to be approached from the player’s corporeal immersion in the playground. I have insisted that the player is a meaning-giver. It should be clear now that the player’s intertwinedness with the playground also transforms her into a meaning-receiver. My participation in a football game, for example, exposes me to a set of meanings that constitute the world of football—the playground. Nonetheless, the reception of meaning occurs only through my active participation in the world of football, that is, through my meaning-giving power. As suggested before, it is in the midst of our meaning-giving dimension interwoven with our meaning-receiving one that the tension between these two poles loosens up and an authentic stance in life emerges.

The player and the playground cannot be divorced from each other. If they are separated, play as the unfolding of an expression which is itself meaningful can be attributed to an external causality or as a product of finding a sign from which meaning is deduced. Recognizing that play is lived as the coming to be of a significative intention implies that it cannot be reduced to exclusively a meaning-giving act because players are never detached from their playgrounds. On the other hand, play finds no explanation and is not lived as the passive reception of qualities generated in the playground. At play in whatever playground, players are situated, the emergent meaning is self-contained

because the player's meaning-giving power simultaneously constitutes her meaning-receiving capacity. The lived freedom and incarnation of thought is inscribed in the body-subject's *I can* mode of existence.

The whole existence of the player is then liberated in the meaning expressed. The player is her playing and the meaning incarnated is all that counts. Merleau-Ponty said that in instances in which first order speech occurs, language "becomes something like a universe, and it is capable of lodging things themselves in this universe—after it has transformed them into their meaning" (1964b, p. 43). If play, as the materialization of a new thought, is not the translation of a previously written text, it seems true that the player's original speech is a new voice which constitute its own universe. My play experiences in football pitches and classrooms confirm this. The lived sense of clarity coming from skillful movements and teaching methods suiting students are totalities in which the inspired doing is all that matters.

It is precisely because of this sense of self-sufficiency that play has been deemed as an autotelic occurrence, one that fulfills nothing but its own goal. Although the player's interaction with a playground may start in the pursuit of an extrinsic goal, this utilitarian attitude gets passed over when the player and the playground fall into a relationship of play. Similarly, people sometimes appear to be cavorting with no fixed goal; however, if play arises the sense of being goalless also fades away as a new thought-project comes to erect itself as a universe. The fact that play is lived autotelically does not mean that any

voluntary involvement in a playground with the sole purpose of enjoying in it for its own sake constitutes an instance of play. In other words, the thematization of the extrinsic or the boring does not secure the appearance of play.

As seen, only when the transparent lived synergy between the player and the playground allows freeing and enacting a speaking word, which does not require any external mechanism to apprehend its meaning, play manifests itself in its full splendor. Since play expresses a manner of existing in the world in which players' potentialities actualize a thought for the first time, it is not banality. Play is more like a mode of accessing and unfolding in the playground than a means to something else. That is why play presents to players, in and through them, meaning so well.

The meaning of that which appears in and through the mutual co-determination between the player and the playground constitutes a simultaneous affirmation and negation of culture. I have previously established that the meaning of the spoken word becomes a fixation in the course of social life so it looks like a natural and permanent meaning. On the contrary, the speaking word, that which is uttered at play, is an original phenomenon that enacts a novel meaning making words say what they have never yet expressed. Merleau-Ponty understood the sedimentation of expression and its repetition as the socially available stock of meanings. For him, expression of "second hand is what is generally meant by culture" (1964a, p. 18). However, Merleau-Ponty continued, an authentically expressive human being "is not satisfied to be a cultured animal



but assimilates the culture down to its very foundations and gives it a new structure: he speaks as the first man spoke and paints as if no one had ever painted before” (1964a, pp. 18-19).

The lived meaning liberated and incarnated in play, that is the embodied thought which belongs to the player and the playground, relates to culture—available meanings—as the ground from which play-expression is possible. Although the reception and situatedness in culture allows cultural transmission and continuation, human beings are not entirely satisfied with this operation and seek to transcend it. On the one hand, available meanings hold the potential for and are indispensable to authentic expression. As noted, they function as *warm up* experiences that predispose people well to enter play. On the other hand, those meanings are deemed as restrictive and the site of sedimented meaning. This double side of culture, its stimulating but sedimented character, helps understand how play does both, affirms and negates culture. In a sense, the player disregards available meanings as insufficient. However, in another sense, the player does so while taking up and providing them with a novel signification. In short, players “destroy ordinary language, but [only] by realizing it” (1964b, p. 79).

The culture is never so sterile as to just reproduce meanings. It always holds the potential for presenting new vistas on life. It invites people to speak as the first person spoke. Here, once again, is seen the interdependency of the player and the playground as a whole, one that gives-receives authentic

meaning. Playgrounds come embedded in cultures, but only players can encounter them while at the same time making them possible. As already noted, the moment that the player experiences the clarity of embodying a new signification in which she and playground become a living unity, play emerges. And when play is manifested, culture is not just reproduced and transmitted but created. Players are immediately aware of their creations.

The meaning of play is the meaning of the genesis of culture.<sup>28</sup> This is precisely why play is so treasured: in and through it not only are new thoughts freed and incarnated but immediately and tacitly apprehended as well. In the birth and expression of meaning enacted by the player, which in turn entails a parallel and synchronic movement of preservation and suppression, realization and destruction of culture, Merleau-Ponty's contention that people are not mere cultured animals is better understood. Being residents of a culture is not enough to live an authentic life. Humans look for avenues to make sense of, and express their lives in unique ways. At play people realize that they are not translating clearly defined thoughts. The coming into being of a significative intention emerges from an ambiguity that is not lived as such. In those playful instances, players realize that "there was *something* rather than *nothing* to be said" (1964a, p. 19) and that people are more than cultured beings. The manifestation of play as an instance of authentic expression finds people alive and makes human beings creators of culture.

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<sup>28</sup> This conclusion is in accordance with Huizinga's (1955) view that play functions as the basis for civilization.

#### 5.4 Summary: first order play and second order play

Throughout this chapter I have emphasized that play does not necessarily arise in or belong to any particular activity or event. Indeed, play can emerge and surprise people virtually anywhere and anytime. To the extent that play is a special mode of disclosing projects toward the world rather than a specific deed or location of the world, no particular realm of life can rightly claim a monopoly on play.

Just as play has the potential to present itself everywhere at any moment, it can also surprise anybody. Although play has been seen as the natural domain of children, it does not recognize differences of age, gender, race, socio-economic status, or skill development. Play is not the exclusive property of any identifiable group. In a sense, while alive people are always *at risk* of finding and-or being found by play (Kretchmar, 1994).

The fact that play can reveal itself in every sphere of life regardless of people's condition and developmental stage poses significant challenges for accurate description. At first sight, play appears limitless. But nothing could be further from the truth; play has limits. However, the boundaries of play are in a permanent state of change. Traditional accounts of play have not recognized this dynamism and have tended to tear apart the player from the playground, reifying play in one or both of these two poles. Play either happens in the player or in the playground. That is why teachers would tell *distracted* students to stop playing in the classroom and focus on their studies. Similarly, parents would tell

their *bored* daughters to go to the football field or tennis court to play. The keys to play are found in the player or environment, respectively.

The goal of these concluding pages is to summarize my discussion of play in order to be able to distinguish those activities or experiences ordinarily referred to as play without much qualification from instances of *lived* play. Borrowing Merleau-Ponty's terminology I will call the former second order play and the latter first order play. The intention is to qualify play in terms of the reciprocal relationship between the player and the playground and the stance in life this synergy makes possible.

I have argued that play is an autotelic manner of approaching and unfolding in the world that necessarily includes a player and a playground. However, I have taken this notion of play not as an objective structure but as a general description of one way people live their actual involvement in an event or activity. That is, I have shifted the focus on autotelicity from an analytic category to a way of living toward the world—one which people grow toward in all of its rich varieties. In this regard I have first established that play is an existential phenomenon through and in which human beings unfold their being-in-the-world in a unique manner. This means that play constitutes a primordial dialog between human beings' inevitable bodily openness, commitment, and attachment to the world. People's mode of being at play enunciates a radical and mutual conjugation of potentialities held by the body-subject and the world. In other words, as players, humans enter and affect available playgrounds with

their playing bodies while at the same time their playing bodies are constituted and reconstituted by those playgrounds.

The recognition that play is a temporary autotelic mode of existing in which people's bodily character is constituted and reconstituted by available playgrounds has also been regarded as intentional. In this context the intentional nature refers to the spontaneous and meaningful structurization of the playground. To put it differently, the intentionality of play does not relate to a voluntary dimension but to a tacit arrangement of the playground in which some elements come to the fore. Those elements are, then, highlighted and take a central role. However, this operation of centralization is only possible within the background provided by the rest of the playground. Play environments are totalities that by no means impose themselves upon the player. On the contrary, the player and the playground reciprocally construct the meaningful center-background totality.

The third and final general characterization of play advanced is intimately related to its existential and intentional dimensions. As a spontaneous and meaningful way of having-receiving the world, play is expressive. As players take up and are taken up by playgrounds, they find themselves pressing out a constellation of significances. This, once again, does not constitute a voluntary act. In a sense, as players are condemned to playgrounds, they are also fated to express the meaning that the player-playground intertwinedness incarnates. As

a mode of existing in the world, the tension between the player-playground constitution of play is always already expressive.

The general description of play as an existential, intentional and expressive phenomenon allowed me to inquire what kind of expression players embody. For, if play is a unique mode of being-in-the-world, its materialization has to disclose this uniqueness. Following Merleau-Ponty's notions that expression is existence in action and that the content of expression is unavoidably connected with the enactment of expression, I have said that the meaning of play is to be found nowhere else than in the material unfolding of play. The self-containedness characteristic of play was further qualified under the light of two of Merleau-Ponty's concepts related to expression: first and second order speech. The latter is the use of pre-conceived thought; the former manifests the successful coming into being of a novel thought or significative intention. Play understood as an expression of first order speech, in which the contemporaneous partnership between the player and the playground provides a foundational change in people's openness to the world, accounts for its experienced extraordinariness. At play, players are surprised by the emergence, incarnation, and immediate awareness of a new meaning that teaches the player its own novelty. When players find and are found by their original acts of expression, first order play has the potential to arise.

Not every instantiation of first order speech constitutes first order play. However, first order speech is a condition for first order play. The latter

manifests a certain way to experience the former. In first order play, players are *conscious of* the surge of a novel signification. This, of course, does not require any act of reflection but rather an immediate and pre-reflective awareness of the experienced communion between the player and the playground. To play at a deep level is to constitute this expression, and to immediately sense or experience the utterance of fresh meanings.

I have provided two personal experiential accounts of what the *consciousness of* first order play looks like. In other words, with those descriptions I have explored the specific characteristics of the experience of play. My football example manifests a novel partnership between my footed-self (the playing body) and the world of football (the playground). I recognized the coming to be of a new *speaking I*, an I that possesses the ability to *play* certain skills and tricks for the first time. This is one of the elements I highlighted as being *conscious of* playing. Experiencing first order play brings a sense of birth to the spontaneous enactment of an original meaning.

What emerges at first order play is a new I-player, through and in the materialization of an expression of first order speech (expression) made possible only by the concurrent and fluctuating contribution of both player and playground. I noticed this in the bringing to light of a new intention and synchrony in a nexus of footed-thinking and football, or didactic material and teaching method. In a sense, the new player *is* my fresh playing but this playing, as it is the outcome of the immediate and unequivocal relationship between the playing feet or hands

and the football pitch or classroom, emerges from and in ambiguity. It is not possible to determine where play starts and where it will take the player because playing is not completely subsumed by either the player or the playground, neither spiritual nor material.

In spite of the fact that first order play is born in the obscure and indeterminate nexus between the player and the playground, this ambiguity is not experienced as such. I noticed this characteristic saying that while enacting a novel football move, feet and football environment develop a familiarity as the one presented by my tongue, teeth, and palate. In other words, first order play constitutes a radical simultaneity, transaction, and unity of the player and the playground in which the meaning embodied is also apprehended and, more importantly, lived as transparent. For me there was just playing football feet. Likewise, for all other first order players, play carries a similar contemporaneous incarnation and liberation of meaning that is at the same time clearly apprehended.

The tacit disclosure and embodiment of a new meaning also brings about a mutually entailing interrogation between the player and the playground. The player explores the possibilities opened up by the playground while affirming and inquiring into her own potentialities. This interrogative operation though is not lived as an explicit questioning. First order players experience the sense of inquiry in finding answers. In other words, the player's questioning becomes a tacit project of exploration. I found myself taking my teaching abilities to corners



of the classrooms while being taken to these places. First order players inspect themselves and their playgrounds while incarnating a new living coherence. The organization of what has been so far unorganized leaves the inquiry behind and is lived as an expansion of the player's capacity to negotiate with the playground.

The immediate apprehension of the player's stretched ability to unfold in the playground resides in the playing body. This was revealed in my spontaneous encounter of a teaching technique that allowed me to capitalize on the interest of a motivated group. First order players always inscribe and manifest their playing in their bodies. In this sense, and following Merleau-Ponty's discoveries, I can say that first order play, as the lived carnal projection of meaning, constitutes an instance of thinking. For him, thinking is grounded in people's bodies and immersed in the world. My *teaching I*, a *playing I*, is at the same time a *thinking I can*.

The new signification made visible in and through the playing body's *I can* surprises the player as an instantiation born without having the intention of bringing it to light. First order play is being *conscious of* the unambiguous liberation and incarnation of a self-sufficient meaning. The player's interwovenness with the playground transforms the experience of first order play into one in which the player gives and receives meaning. The tension between the meaning-giving and the meaning-receiving poles of the player which is co-constituted by the playground loosens up and integrates themselves in a new partnership. First order play is precisely being *conscious of* the freedom brought

about by the material formation in the playing body of a new intentionality. In the case of football it was my feet finding and being found, that is liberating and embodying the skills and tricks that, surprising me, were displayed on the ground.

Having seen the general characteristics of play and what the player is *conscious of* while in first order play, it should not be difficult to recognize so-called instances of play that fall short. I suggest the case of romping. The fact of moving about in a boisterous manner, albeit attractive to the romper, does not seem to constitute per se an instance where coherences are born. The same can be said about gambling or frolicking. The manifested joy, spontaneity, and non-productivity of these activities have been traditionally seen as the elements that promote play. However, this is a simple view that not only detaches the player from the playground but more importantly approaches play as a mere diversion that occupies the player's attention in a superficial manner. These activities, which are characterized by a merry attitude may be properly labeled second order play. They bring about and are lived in a spirit of fun but they fall short of the unique lived unity manifested in first order play.

There are some other activities that are also pursued for their own sake but whose function is just amusement or entertainment. Watching television or spending few days in Disneyland are frequently identified as play. The focus of these experiences seem to be primarily hedonistic and rarely, if ever do, they generate the sort of fresh partnership between the player and the playground

required and aroused in first order play. Most of the time the pleasure experienced in front of the television or in Disneyland is a sedation that distances the player from the playground. People's lived experience of such activities confirms a superficial commitment to the playground. Where pre-conceived and packaged meaning prevail, first order play rarely manifests itself.

## Chapter 6

### **Play, society, and education: reevaluation and practical implications**

Philosophy, understood as a project people actively pursue rather than as an academic body of knowledge which is merely studied in college, gains its full significance only when it influences the way people live in the world, that is people's concrete practices and actions. The cultivation of what is usually known as the unity of theory and practice is fulfilled when philosophers are prepared to act on their beliefs. If philosophers fail to embody their beliefs in their lives, they must, at least, doubt many of those beliefs. A coherent life requires rejecting the divorce of philosophical thinking from the demands of daily existence and action. Therefore, as John Lachs (1995) aptly noted, "our broader concerns must, accordingly, focus on the application of philosophical knowledge and skills to the pressing problems of personal and social life" (p. 4).

Following Lachs' plea that philosophers and educators embody the unity of theory and practice, the purpose of this chapter is to revisit the role and significance of play in education and identify some practical ideas for promoting play in the educational realm. These guidelines are, of course, based on the philosophic conclusions reached in the previous chapter. They are not intended as a complete catalog of play strategies or tidy recipes. Rather, these practical

applications are meant as suggestions to encourage educators to find their own ways to stimulate play experiences.

To better accomplish its goal the chapter is divided into four sections. The first section explores the status, role, and value that play has received in contemporary Western societies. The second section critically assesses the way in which those visions of play have impacted education in general and physical education in particular. The third section reevaluates the significance of play for educational projects. Finally, the fourth section suggests practical applications not just to promote play, but to promote first order play experiences.

## **6.1 Play and society**

The cultural milieu of contemporary Western societies does not grant people much license to play. Despite commendable efforts “to proclaim, to extol, to champion, and to celebrate the cause of frivolity, uselessness, unproductivity, inconsequentiality, nonachievement, gratuitousness, irrelevance, and irreverence,” (Meier, 1980, p. 24) play still enjoys a marginal status in society. This state of affairs is hardly surprising given the hegemonic ideological forces shaping Western liberal democracies. For many authors (Gruneau, 1983; Lasch 1978; Kretchmar 1994; Meier, 1980; Morgan, 1982) the reasons for the marginalization, trivialization, and retrenchment of play from the cultural landscape have to be found in the values, practices, and ideas that people use to

make sense of the world. A pervasive set of beliefs by which life is envisioned, explained, and structured comes from the economic organization of society.

Current economic structures and relationships place an enormous emphasis on labor, production, and consumption at the expense of play. To an important degree, life, including play, revolves around economic interests. The economic cycle and the diverse ways in which individuals insert themselves in it, regulates and characterizes social and personal life. The pre-eminence in society of this economic ethos locates work and play as antinomic realities in which “work and production became the ideal, and then the idol, of the age” (Huizinga, 1955, p. 192). No wonder, then, that the result is a cultural climate in which play is dominated by and places second to work. Under such circumstances there is little room to praise autotelic merit and futility. People are required to be serious and sober. Morgan (1982) summarized the consequences for those who dare to consecrate themselves to play:

In a society which prides itself on the “equal liability of all to work,” and in which one’s self-worth and anchor in society—not to mention the very structure of one’s day—is rooted in work, its decrease can only be viewed with suspicion (p. 38).

The supremacy of instrumental enterprises, efficiency, and exotelicity in society not only throws a veil of suspicion to those who find delight in undertaking projects for intrinsic purposes but, more importantly, it also questions their humanity. “For that humanity has been subtly molded and managed by

capitalism, such that the limits of being human have been rendered co-extensive with those of work” (Morgan 1982, p. 38). In predominantly pragmatically oriented cultures, work and production best dignify and elevate humanity. The world of functions and achievements is, from this point of view, the source of personal as well as social identity, history, and values. Calls to play are cheapened and seen “as though directed at the very foundations of human society” (Pieper, 1964, p. 4). On the contrary, the glorification of rationality, order, discipline, and control, all foundational values of the economic system, allows people to enrich their lives and comprehend themselves as fully human.

The search for reasons underlying the heralding of work and production, and the devaluing of play, must also extend, as Meier (1980) proposed, to another influential ideological force in society: the realm of the sacred. Despite the differences between the stated purposes of the economy and those of religion, these spheres of life have been combined in many ways over the last two centuries. Max Weber studied their connections and mutual influence in his classic treatise *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, which focuses on the relationship between the Protestant Reformation and the development of capitalism. His conclusion was that Protestantism “promoted a ‘code of ethics’ and a general approach to life that created in people deep moral suspicion about erotic pleasure, physical desire, and all forms of idleness” (Coakley, 2001, p. 463). Protestantism emphasized values supportive of work, production and accumulation, and was suspicious of the play spirit.

If the economy emphasizes human beings as workers or producers—*homo faber*—and portrays play as useless and unable to emancipate humanity, religious beliefs remind people of the moral duties to glorify God and gain salvation through worldly dedication to work. In this scheme there is little, if any, room to indulge in autotelic activities. Those events are constructed as unproductive and morally dubious. Under this view, people’s mission in life is “not to enjoy and please ourselves, but to serve and glorify God, and be useful to our fellow men. . . . the great end of life after all is *work*” (Hogan, 1967, pp. 124-125).

Even though some theologians consider play as a metaphor for the religious life (Moltmann, 1972), traces of the traditional religious work ethic can be seen in today’s society in secular varieties of this attitude. Meier (1980) believed that this work ethic encourages the development of capitalism and the consequent opposition to play. For him, these normative factors “contributed to the increasing acceptance of the assumption that man’s expectations and orientation should be framed and nurtured under the category of work” (p. 26). Today in many cultures, whether for secular or religious reasons, play is not highly valued.

Theories explaining the distortion and relegation of play in culture emphasizing the ideological operations exercised by economic and religious forces are criticized for overstating the influence of these forces and their negative outcomes. Critics suggest that play is at the present time, maybe more



than ever before, widely regarded as worthwhile and permissible. For them, the value and approval to play is especially true for children. Certainly, play is considered as an essential element of childhood. The response to this criticism is that cultural ideology and its various manifestations are never static and transform themselves in order to give a sense that challenging perspectives and forces are seriously taken into consideration. However, the underlying status quo is not substantially modified. In the case of play, Morgan (1982) said that this phenomenon came to be legitimized within the pattern imposed on it by the economy. For him, play suffered a “metamorphosis into a productive force” (p. 35).

This transformation explains the changing role and value of play in modern society. Play is, indeed, receiving more attention. The irony is that play is not seen as good in and of itself but as a powerful means to serve further, more serious ends in life. In this regard Meier (1980) accepted that play is today permissible for children but protested the fact that this is so “because its utilitarian functions of learning, socialization, and general preparation for later life provide rational justification” (p. 27). The argument is forceful: the license to play is derived from its productive value and instrumental rationality. Kretchmar (1994) summarized the point saying that when excessive rationalism is the guiding principle in life, “people lose their ability to be spontaneous and just play” (p. 103). In other words, people today must have good reasons to play!

It is clear from the above that valuing play for what it does not entail trivializes this unique way of unfolding in the world. Play is, then, appreciated as something useful rather than as an expressive experience that is intrinsically meaningful. The subordination of play to instrumental purposes has taken multiple forms. The most pervasive uses of play include what is known as its restorative, compensatory, and prophylactic functions (Morgan, 1982). To put it differently, play is constructed as a powerful tool that offers a respite from the burden of work, provides distraction and entertainment, prevents burnouts, and gets people ready to face work with a feeling of being energized.

However, the experience of play, as I have argued in the previous chapter, has nothing to do with the achievement of external goals. Rather, it points toward a unique expressive partnership between a player and a playground. The current cultural craving for objective achievement and material success belittles play and treats it “as a sort of Coca-Cola philosophy: ‘the pauses that refreshes’ *in order that* one may do more work” (Miller, 1973, p. 70). Unfortunately, under this instrumental ethos, those who frequent play find themselves giving excuses for dancing and cavorting without definite goals. Play in Western societies is constructed as an accessory to work—one taking its shape, values, and character from productivity.

Before fully analyzing why it is important to promote play and advance practical applications to do it, I will review the consequences and challenges that accepting play as ancillary to work and the economic system pose for education.

I will particularly focus on the effects that the adulation of work, and consequent detriment of play, has upon physical education and its practices.

## **6.2 Play and education**

Education, in its broader sense, is a lifelong process by which people aim at improving the whole of their lives and elevate existence to a superior plane. This process takes place in many different circumstances and settings. They include but are not limited to activities such as reading books, participating in sandlot games, listening to the radio, talking to a friend, observing people while walking down the street, and take place in places such as clubs, churches, political organizations, theaters, or families. From this point of view, education happens virtually everywhere and all the time. On the other hand, education is, for pragmatic reasons, also understood and constructed in a narrow sense. This limited sense is known as schooling.

Schooling refers to the educational experiences that occur in an environment specifically designed for teaching and learning during a certain period of time. Theoretically, the primary purposes and functions of schools consist in the development of human potentiality, the transmission of sets of beliefs, ideas, skills and ways in which individual and societal experiences are organized, and the empowerment of people to freely, responsibly, and critically operate in society. Due to the essential role that schools occupy in people's lives

and societies' dynamics, throughout this section I will focus on the impact that the status of play described above has had on the narrow understanding of education and physical education.

Education is tightly connected to and strongly influenced by the hegemonic ideological forces shaping society. As a social institution, education is not immune to the reigning social climate in which prudence and instrumental concerns prevail. Although it is remarkably difficult to reach agreement on what content and kind of learning experiences are desirable for those attending schools, it should be no surprise that the overwhelming prioritization of an ecology of productivity and efficiency over play and serendipity characterizes much of education. The current orientation, structure, and identity of education is, therefore, associated with providing students fundamental academic skills, transmitting useful information, and, ultimately, preparing them to succeed in the ever-demanding world of work. These goals, albeit important, are not friendly to autotelic enterprises and have sharpened the dichotomy between play and work.

Under the pressing demand to evidence success, achievement, and applicability, education overvalues the qualities of work and undervalues those of play. Because the latter is usually perceived as a realm that does not involve effort and lacks instrumental worth, it is regarded as less respectable than those activities which have outcomes susceptible to control and evaluation. As Wood and Attfield (1996) put it, "the unpredictable nature of play also makes it difficult

to plan and assess clearly specified outcomes which, in the current educational climate, undermines its status” (p. 5).

At a time in which education is permeated by a discourse that emphasizes the marketplace, performance, and accountability, the fact that play is not prone to planning and assessment forces this phenomenon out of classrooms.

Unfortunately, play is generally mistrusted and “seen as the enemy of education and . . . relegated to the margins of the school experience” (Wood and Attfield, 1996, p. 11).

One of the educational settings to which play has been confined is early childhood education. There is a strong tradition, which considers play as an essential component in the lives of children and sanctions it as permissible and even desirable. Although there is much debate about how play has to be created, promoted, and interpreted in early childhood education, it is deemed as central to the early childhood curriculum. The thesis that play and the education of children go hand in hand is not novel. The fact that the Greek words for play, education, and children, *paidia*, *paideia*, and *pedia* (*παιζω*, *παιδεία*, *παιδί*) respectively, share the same etymological root testifies to this fact. There are various reasons to justify encouraging play in early childhood education. Two of the most pervasive reasons identified by educators and the public are the beliefs that play promotes learning and facilitates social, moral, physical, and psychological development.

The implicit assumption is that play occupies a legitimate role in the education of children only if it serves some ulterior goal outside itself. As noted in the previous section, in this context, the autotelic and unproductive nature of play is neglected and transformed into a productive force. Hyland (1984) opposed this utilitarian alteration because “play takes its fundamental reference from outside itself, that it is to be evaluated, favorably or not, according to some sphere other than play itself” (p. 5). The justification of play as a vehicle conducive to something more valuable not only trivializes but also poses other problems for this phenomenon in the educational realm.

The utilitarian legitimation of play undermines play’s alleged defense and dismisses the phenomenon both within and outside early childhood education. Built into the acceptance of play during this period of life is the notion that instrumental and productive activities are superior to autotelic and inconsequential ones. In this regard, Wood and Attfield (1996) said that there is a gap between the rhetoric and the reality of play in schools. They pointed out that “most teachers say that they feel play is valuable and has a place in the classroom, yet most also by their attitudes indicate implicitly that it does not have a prime place” (p. 6). Although play has been taken for granted in early childhood education, professional practices reveal a different play picture. This discrepancy between theory and practice and the schism between autotelicity and exotelicity grows stronger and is more explicitly evident beyond the initial stages of education. Outside early childhood education play is barely tolerated.

Physical education cannot escape the utilitarian scheme of play and its corollaries.

Physical education is considered by some an important subject matter in schools, one integral to education. As such, historical, cultural, and social forces shape it. Its visibility in Western education was largely due to the influence of the progressive education movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and its emphasis on the development of the whole child. It was also through that same influence that the profession realized that “play was not only a legitimate but indeed a fundamentally important education focus” (Siedentop, 2001, p. 76). However, the relationship between physical education’s increasing respectability and the recognition of the importance of play did not result in an explosion of play in schools’ gymnasias, playgrounds, and classrooms; rather it generated a tension that foreshadowed the fate of play in those settings.

Contemporary physical education adopted play, and legitimized its place in school, at the expense of its very nature. As utilitarian conceptions came to dominate education, physical education had to demonstrate productivity and effectiveness in furthering the broader goals of education. Under this pressure, physical education has emphasized using play and motor-related activities to serve and reach these goals. The fate of play in physical education is not different from the one it suffered in the entire field of education. That is, play’s uniqueness is reduced to a means value that leads to other, more important, end values and is cramped into the early stages of education.

During the late 1960s and early 1970s a group of physical educators reacted against the utilitarian and restricted approach to play in physical education and “began to argue that the activities of physical education were valuable *in and of themselves*” (Siedentop, 2001, p. 81). This movement was known as *play education*. Despite its refusal to defend play and motor-related activities in reference to external outcomes and broader educational goals, play education “did not directly influence curriculum development in schools” (Siedentop, 2001, p. 82). The entrenchment and influences of the ideological framework praising work, gravity, competition, and exertion in education questioned the supposed sterile character of autotelic enterprises and forced a return to a *responsible use* of physical education classes. As Meier (1980) noted, within the profession, “play is frequently posited to serve a prophylactic or therapeutic service as recreation, warding off disasters and ills of the mind and the body, and also developing health, fitness, and strength, thereby facilitating increased productivity” (p. 28).

The demise of play as an experience that is good in itself and the reliance on utilitarian traditions has had enormous consequences for physical education. On the one hand, as already indicated, play is poorly represented in early childhood physical education classes and becomes increasingly scarce as students climb up the educational ladder. On the other hand, the status that play enjoys in physical education inspires strategies that continue to distance and retrieve this phenomenon from the general orientation of the profession.



Kretchmar (1994) considered that undervaluing play has resulted in a profession overly committed to the development of skills, fitness, knowledge, and morality. Regarding physical education's strategy of emphasizing movement's utility he declared:

Unfortunately, this strategy devalues sport, games, and play. It says, in effect, that these are unimportant in themselves but may still be useful as tools. It says that time spent in these activities is inherently wasted time, unless one learns lessons or gains fitness from them. This produces a Pyrrhic victory. It avoids the potential awkwardness of highlighting such supposedly dubious content as sport, games, and play, but at the cost of characterizing the field as one that has little or no intrinsically valuable content of its own. (p. 188).

These concerns about portraying physical education as a profession that organizes itself around important educational goals and the adulation of efficiency and productivity have an unmistakable impact on everyday teaching methodologies, styles, and practices. The latter are continuously rigid, monotonous, and standardized. In this regard, Kretchmar (1994) said that physical education puts play to work and is often conducted in a spirit that does not embrace values such as spontaneity, creativity, and surprise. For him, "many physical education teachers, by personality and operational style, have been far closer to drill instructors than playmakers" (p. 105). In the name of rationality,

physical education has also favored programs that are scientifically grounded but meaningfully barren. “The result is often a set of experiences that is too culturally sterile, too disconnected from students’ and clients’ day-to-day lives” (p. 104).

A physical education curriculum in which play is overridden by the value of instrumental and objectively quantifiable outcomes not only tends to purge the profession of historically meaningful activities but also focus on performance, achievement, and success. As a consequence, Kretchmar (1994) believed that physical education puts an inordinate emphasis on the qualities of health, winning and records, and the use of motor-related activities as a psychological fix and energy fountain. This state of affairs seriously impairs possibilities for genuine manifestations of play and negatively affects the training of future physical education teachers.

Meier (1980) distinguished three main undesirable effects of the absence of play in the preparation of physical education teachers. He thought that according to the current ethos in education, institutions of higher education are training professionals who become technocrats of the body, specialists in the science of human productivity, and experts in industrial psychology. The charge is, on the one hand, that future professionals prioritize the repair and maintenance of the human organism “because of the postulated concomitant increases in labor concentration and output, absence of fatigue, and extended work life” (p. 28). On the other hand, along the same lines, students of physical education learn techniques to provide children with diversions so later they can

focus on the serious aspect of schoolwork and be more productive while making school environments more bearable.

In concluding this section, it might be said that due to external and internal forces in contemporary society neither education nor physical education are receptive to the idea that the experience of play as a special opening to the world belongs on its own merits to these settings. Under a social climate, which is obsessed with control, evaluation, productivity, and accountability, play is confined to early childhood. However, even here in education and physical education, play has been reluctantly accepted and tolerated as a mere means to other ends. For the former, play is partially legitimized because it fosters learning and child development. In the case of the latter, play is postulated, and minimized, as a contributor to more important educational goals. This context also produces undesirable consequences in the training of future teachers. Professional educators are often taught to be more mechanics of the body and rational calculators of physical therapy than promoters of intimate relationships with and affection for the activities that students meet.

### **6.3 Reevaluating play in education**

The previous sections have shown that due to the major forces shaping Western societies, the mood in much of education has become too serious. Although writers have emphasized for centuries that play is important and

valuable, it is conspicuously absent from the school experience. The exception to this situation is found in early childhood education, where play is primarily accepted as a means to prepare children for future life roles and duties. However, even at this level, teachers themselves implicitly foster the idea that play is trivial and subsidiary to work in their managing of classrooms and gymnasium activities. Current educational organization is centered on controlled and structured practices at the expense of play.

I believe that play is underrepresented in the curriculum because education has been approached much too narrowly for its stated aims. That is, out of the two primary foci, the development of human potentiality and the initiation of the youth into culture, education has focused inordinately on the latter. If education largely neglects the former, play is easier to ignore and, consequently, the school experience is prone to be homogenized, regimentalized, and impersonalized. Whenever intrinsic value and self-sufficiency are undervalued in education, the temptation exists to appeal to the *one size fits all* strategy and compromise or threaten that which individual human beings consider and live as special.

If education were to focus on its central mission, that is, to develop people's potential and help them recast their existence, play might well be considered one of its essential components. In this scenario play would not only be tolerated as instrumentally good but appreciated for what it is and carefully cultivated. Even more, the spirit of play would probably be cherished as the most

remarkable feature of education. An education that welcomes and celebrates intrinsically valuable experiences and activities is one that recovers its fundamental relationship with the good life. Usually people regard the good life—the life that is worth living—as one in which what is aimed at and wished for needs no further justification than the satisfaction and meaning it carries in its own right.

If educators persist in presenting the narrow goals of education and their values as superior, useful, and prudential, they convey a sense of sobriety and rationality that prevents students to be magnetized to and fascinated with the inherent attractiveness of the activity or subject matter at hand. On the contrary, students who receive playful invitations would find themselves in new playgrounds not because it is important or beneficial to be there but in spite of it. Play would not be in the shadow of work anymore. For example, students would throw themselves into science, sports, or theater before they recognized a reason for or were sure why they spent so many hours in these playgrounds.

The more a playful spirit is fostered in schools, the greater the opportunities students will have to develop intimate relationships with what is at present time considered the most serious goals, values, and subject matters of education. Students would give themselves and be taken by the magic, intriguing, and captivating experience of writing English poems, solving motor-related problems, exploring the tonal possibilities of flutes and guitars, or discovering the beauty and truth of mathematical formulas. Hopefully, after

school, these activities would be enthusiastically incorporated in students' lives as meaningful playgrounds.

Educational programs that stress play would not stand in opposition to the other important, but narrower, goals and values they are supposed to advance. The paradox of promoting and living play in education is that its *utilitarian value* resides in its being *instrumentally useless*. When play is used to or required to serve an end outside itself, its meaning and charm vanish. More importantly, its value is undermined. The usefulness of play is not to be found in the traditional sense of the word (i.e. instrumental payoffs) but within its own boundaries.

Playing will not *necessarily* make students more accomplished physicists, artists, English writers, football players, or morally superior beings and not organized for that purpose. This is not to deny the possibility that cultivating play in education might lead to desirable goals. However, as Kretchmar (1994) said, "any good consequences that come from play are serendipitous" (p. 211). And I would add that these consequences are also meaningful and delightful because they come, precisely, from play.

Any good that might come from playing does not account for the playing. In the end, playing is its own reward, although it might be the source of a great deal of what people deem as *useful*, and hence cannot be itself *useful*. An infusion of play and its aura into education might preserve it as a site where the good life is not only objectively known or encountered but tasted, celebrated, and even shared. "Wherever play does its work, its effects are unmistakable and of

life-changing significance” (Kretchmar, 1994, p. 221). The work of play is not to perform any work at all. However, this lack of instrumentality profoundly touches the being of people. Indeed, play’s self-sufficiency opens new vistas and transforms the player’s unfolding world. And that seems to be at the core of genuine education.<sup>29</sup>

My speculation that play would flourish in education if it regains its original sense of helping people coming to terms with their own unique lives speaks to play as a foundational change in people’s openness to the world. I take play as an instance of lived autotelicity in which the player and the playground constantly interpenetrate and affect each other. In other words, as established in the last chapter, play is an unfolding of intrinsically meaningful thinking that completes itself. Of course, I am referring to first order play; under this view, the phenomenon of play is inescapably linked to education, for it is a simultaneous transformation of the way in which people have the world and the world that is calling upon them. First order play is a synchronic constructing and living a new stance of life.

The notion that first order play is inherently educational radically departs from positions, which simplify this phenomenon and facilitate the construction of play as the opposite of work and instrumentality. I have extensively reviewed and criticized the later views in chapters 2 and 3. However, it is important to highlight that although most of those views acknowledge the self-sufficient,

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<sup>29</sup> The ideas of the last two paragraphs were inspired by the work of Harper (1985).

intrinsic joy, and voluntary aspect of play, they do not address it as a lived convergence of the player and the playground in ways that spontaneous and original modes of experiencing the world are born. From an experiential point of view, efficiency become irrelevant in first order play. This is so because the latter presents itself without announcement, that is in spite of rationality, and virtually everywhere.

The full incorporation of play into education is, then, based on and requires a double operation: a rediscovery of education's fundamental mission and an appreciation of lived experiences of first order play as intrinsically meaningful expressive unfoldings of people's narrative stories in the world. In this regard, first order play invites professional educators to depart from seeing play as a trivial distraction or shallow occupation. If this double operation materializes, most probably, the pervasive attitude in education would be one of letting things happen, surrendering to the attraction of the world, and welcoming the *risk* of being taken and carried over by the unexpected. First order play *helps* to accomplish this by honoring the cause of lived autotelic meaning, that is the good life.

On the other hand, I recognize the importance that education gives to what I consider its narrow goals, i.e., the transmission of skills and information to operate in society and the world of work. But being sensitive to these goals is distinct from capitulating to them. In an education in which first order play is celebrated, culturally accumulated and sedimented meanings would occupy a



subservient role. The idea is that being exposed to the set of meanings constitutive of, for example, English, chemistry, political science, or sports, would allow students to transform them in an instance of expressive clarity in which the enacted expression is lived as self-sufficient. I speculate that in fostering a playful spirit, students would fall in love with these activities and traditions, and return to them for their inherent value. In doing so, students would also preserve qualities such as interest, spontaneity, and freshness. Instances of first order play, as the materialization of new meanings within the realm of established meanings, do not recognize extrinsic value. First order play constitutes its own pleasure and reward.

As mentioned above, first order play might start in the pursuit of an extrinsic goal, in the case of education the transmission and incorporation of skills and information. But this utilitarian attitude fades or disappears when students and subject matters form expressive unities that allow the liberation and incarnation of new meanings. An education focusing on the latter would reverse the function of accumulated wisdom, for it would serve first order play. In other words, instead of using play to recreate and distract students so they produce better, the *useful* content of education would be *used* to promote first order play. Under this scheme, accumulated meanings would be seen in education as *means* that can lead to the good life rather than converting themselves into the primary goal of education and the content of the good life.

First order play manifests itself in its full splendor when the intimate lived synergy between students and playgrounds allows freeing and enacting a new intrinsic and coherently valuable expression. Since first order play does not merely repeat meanings but expresses a manner of existing in the world in which people's potentialities actualize thinking for the first time, it is no banality. Indeed, it must be the priority in education, and probably life at large.

#### **6.4 Practical implications for promoting first order play**

Earlier in this chapter it was said that professionals should be prepared to act on and be committed to their beliefs if they want to be taken seriously. In order to be consistent with this tenet, in this last section I suggest general strategies to promote better quality of play experiences in education—that is first order play.<sup>30</sup> These suggestions are not meant to be concluding recipes. The main idea is to encourage professional educators find their own ways to reverse the growing out of play promoted by education. Although these practical applications are primarily intended for educational settings, they do not apply only to children and classrooms and gymnasias. The understanding of play based on the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty has implications for education understood in its broader sense, that is, the development of human potential in people's lives from beginning to end. Consequently, this section can be of help for educators and the general public alike.

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<sup>30</sup> In this section I use play and first order play interchangeably.

Of course, the standpoint taken here does not mean that play experiences can be mandated or guaranteed. Any claim asserting the contrary would betray the view of play defended in this project. However, I believe that some environments facilitate intrinsic growth and meaning whereas others tend to prevent it. Therefore, although students cannot be required to fall into play, professional educators might enable, create, and stimulate first order play experiences in classrooms and gymnasia. Teachers have a critical role, and probably a responsibility too, in setting up environments conducive to the emergence and flourishing of play. In order to be good *first order playmakers* and design play-friendly environments, educators need to accept and address the complexity and fragility of play.

Educators who wish to help students growing toward play and enhancing the quality of lived play experiences have to agree that this phenomenon is a mode of existing that includes a willing player and an inviting playground. Acknowledging that play is found in the dynamic and intricate interpenetration of these two poles is extremely important to stimulate promising play interventions. On the one hand, if players and playgrounds are never static, educators have to be aware that any change proposed for one pole will always and by necessity have some kind of effect on the other pole and in the experience of play as a whole. Due to the changing nature of players and playgrounds, educators have also to realize that what might work today in promoting first order play might not work tomorrow. Their attitude has to be one of openness and flexibility.

On the other hand, the fundamental unity and reciprocity of players and playgrounds provides educators with two fertile sites from which to promote first order play: players' attitudes and playgrounds' invitations. Players, playgrounds, and their mutual co-determination compose the whole of the play environment. Educators can target one element of the whole enabling structure to promote play. In this regard both players' predisposition toward playgrounds and playgrounds' nature and qualities have to be the twin foci of the teacher concerned about forging play. Keeping in mind that play and its possibilities inevitably change as the play environment goes through alterations, I will propose play interventions based on its two necessary components. These practical suggestions imply that educators have already assumed a playful attitude toward education. If that were not the case, they would undermine their playful proposals.

#### **6.4.1 The player**

The attitudinal orientation that people carry when facing and entering potential playgrounds deeply foreshadows the kind of relationship that will come up from the encounter. As Kretchmar (1992) noted, when players "are indifferent, bothered, preoccupied, fearful, or otherwise indisposed" (p. 6) play rarely arises. The prevailing ethos in education overly stresses success, control, productivity, and academic competition. This climate pressures children to focus

on results, efficiency, and achievements, and mitigates against the emergence of play in classrooms and gymnasias. Students are too preoccupied with tests, scores and grades, performances, and comparisons to let intrinsic interests and satisfaction grow strong. I believe that teachers can promote first order play and do a great service to students by removing these attitudinal hurdles. I call this practical suggestion an operation to de-preoccupy students.

To de-preoccupy students means that educators have to emphasize a value orientation that enables and praises the satisfaction of doing things for its own sake. An attitude that makes students available for play departs from the logic of utility and achievement. The centrality of the proposal is to let students appreciate the intriguing and captivating qualities of subject matters and activities in an atmosphere in which they are not nervous over results and consequences established beforehand. In order to predispose students to develop the kind of partnership with playgrounds in which autotelic expressions are possible, the underlying message has to be that schools and learning are sites where enjoyment and delight are, at least, as important as hard work. Under this scenario, students will not be ready to play when schoolwork is finished but transform and live schoolwork as an intrinsically satisfying process. Good outcomes will be seen as unexpected consequences of such a process.

A welcoming attitude toward play requires a value orientation that promotes doing over results, process over outcomes, and meaning over rational calculation but also a profound and sincere respect for the activity and subject

matter in question. Teachers who are passionate about their professional area of expertise appreciate better the worth of their field and transmit a contagious invitation to encounter these unique qualities. That is, students' readiness to play will get even stronger when realizing that their teachers surrender to live the inherent goodness and truth of English, football, painting, or the sciences with them. This is not to deny the important role that educators have in the teaching-learning process. On the contrary, and consistent with the significance that play would have in a playful education, teachers will embody a loving attitude toward their crafts and traditions that facilitates students' respect and engagements with these values. Following loving teachers, students will get inspired, excited, and sustain intrinsically meaningful affairs with academic subject matters.

In order to promote play readiness in school, educators can also invite students to explore and actualize personal meaningful alternatives to solving problems rather than encouraging imitation of objective models. Usually, when seeking solutions to problematic situations, teachers favor copying and repeating conventional wisdom. However, if the goal is to let students become interested in and responsive to the problem at hand, teachers have to encourage experiencing new and unique perspectives on approaching the situation. The process of exploring and the appreciation of what it entails can be valued for its own sake. I believe that if students value and are motivated to explore and try, first order play is more likely to flourish, for doing and living the goods of a practice will be celebrated. I recognize that the materialization of this celebration

requires not only patience but also valuing spontaneity and, probably, the acceptance of what might appear first as unorthodox results or outcomes. But an intrinsically meaningful discovery that opens the door for a different engagement with the activity at hand is worth the effort.

The kind of intimacy between players and playgrounds lived in first order play experiences is more likely to appear if students have time to taste the uniqueness of the tradition they are being immersed in. The discovery of personal relevant horizons requires a double and simultaneous emphasis on behalf of educators: the freedom to explore and the time to discover. Those who are only given the opportunity to take a bird's-eye view of playgrounds can hardly become attuned to them. In other words, it is not enough to have been in a playground but to be provided with opportunities to grow into its internal qualities and secrets, so that students enjoy experiencing playgrounds for what they are and not for what they are capable of producing. The logic of utility tends to disappear when people know that a given activity or subject matter is a wellspring of undeniably delightful invitations. But this recognition does not occur overnight.

Teachers have to provide proper amounts of time not only to encourage students to discover play invitations but also to promote incorporating them into their life journeys. Students who are sensitive to the richness of play invitations will continue returning to the fountain from where they come forth because the experience is captivating and fully rewarding. Probably, after tasting excellent

quality play, students will run back to these magic places . . . Spanish lessons, baseball fields, piano keyboards! People come back again and again to places where things of interest happen. They develop a profound sense of intimacy, care, and commitment, usually recognized as love. Play is a love affair—one in which people are willing and able to give themselves up to a playground without expecting any payoff. A moment of love does not recognize any utility to it. As Kretchmar (1994) put it, “play produces givers and allows people to reap the benefits of uncalculated, spontaneous commitment” (p. 223). Teachers have to promote play as love affairs in order to nourish and incorporate the taste for fresh expression, surprise, and intrinsic meaning into the fabric of students’ lives.

People’s subjective readiness to play is strongly affected by their perception and actual abilities to enter into a significant dialogue with available playgrounds. On the other hand, due to the dynamic nature of human beings, the opposite is also true—capabilities for unfolding in playgrounds affect people’s dispositions to play. This intricate relationship between people’s attitudes and their abilities to operate in playgrounds provide teachers with another fascinating realm for fostering play experiences, namely people’s capacities to negotiate procedures, or simply skills.

I have noted in the previous chapter that while living first order play there is a meaningful expansion of what the player is able to do as a consequence of a tacit interrogation of the playground. Teachers can promote play, then, by offering exploration opportunities in which students intuit real opportunities to



interact with playgrounds and expand their stock of possibilities. That is, the situations offered by the teacher have to be tailored to the children's particular skill level. The coming to be of a potentiality is usually lived as a project pregnant with intrinsic meaning.

The expansion of skills as possibilities for facilitating play experiences constitutes an invitation to materialize new vistas for students. This invitation, which is at the same time a reminder of students' potential and possibilities, requires a different approach from the part of the educator, for the matter is not just to teach skills but to let students grow in intrinsic significance and expression while doing so. First, students' wide differences in skill levels and learning rhythms have to be acknowledged and addressed. Students have to be seen as ever-changing and unique wholes deserving proper attention, dedication, and stimulation. Second, because the acquisition and development of meaningful skills takes time and involves experimentation, teachers have to remove fears of making mistakes, failing, or losing. Students have to sense that there is an honest invitation to try new alternatives and that it is acceptable if they do not work well at first. Third, teachers have to be committed not to mere repetition of objective models but to let children take and be taken by the expansion of their capability. Teachers' lesson plans should be sensitive to diversity, novelty, and the unexpected. It is not bad to have a progression for teaching skills, if it is used as a flexible guideline. Usually, student's insights and progress make any rigid guidelines useless.

It should be clear that play is taken here as a developmental process—one whose potential is only exhausted when life ends. Although I have been emphasizing practical applications to promote first order play in education, the notion that play evolves according to people's attitudes and ability to make transactions with the world opens possibilities for finding and being found by this way of experiencing reality throughout life as a whole. Because people's engagement with the world and their perspectives are always changing and because not everything can be anticipated, play always has the potential to appear and surprise people. I think that there are good reasons to believe that young and adults alike enjoy some favorable conditions to play. A child's fascination with the surrounding world, their eagerness to discover its secrets and magic, and their plasticity to learn and adapt to novel circumstances facilitate play. On the other hand, an adults' developed capacity to observe complex relationships, their stock of experiences and honed skills, and their longer attention span also position them well to savor play. However, the potential people have to fall into the play spirit across the lifespan needs favorable conditions if it is to be actualized.

In this section I have suggested several practical interventions to foster play in education. These interventions focus on facilitating a welcoming attitude toward play, that is, they encourage students' play readiness. The strategies include shifting the educational climate from one in which results and efficiency prevail to one in which experiencing the intrinsic values of school practices are

favored. Along with showing that learning and schoolwork are sites from enjoyment, I propose that teachers have to display passion for what they do and invite students to discover, respect, and love subject matters for what they are. I also suggest that students should be given the proper amounts of time to discover personally meaningful solutions to the problems they are presented with. In this way they will lovingly incorporate these practices into the fabric of their lives. Finally, in addition to eliminating attitudinal barriers toward play in educational settings, I propose that students are given high quality chances to advance their skills to interact with the world. When confidence in skills and sensibility to do things for their own sake prevail, intrinsically interesting and life long affairs are more prone to capture the hearts of students.

#### **6.4.2 The playground**

I have indicated that play is a developmental process. On the one hand, the evolving nature of human beings suggests that people never go back to the same playground. That is, as the attitudinal and potential skill-memory package with which people enter into a playground changes, so do the possibilities offered by the playground. On the other hand, playgrounds, as universes of latent possibilities, can surprise, affect, and transform the way players unfold in them. Playgrounds offer multiple avenues and imprint different faces on the experience of play. Players and playgrounds change as a result of their relationship and

evolve in copious, most often unpredictable, ways. The experience of first order play recognizes no script or fixed destination. People are never the same players and playgrounds are never identical. In a sense, playgrounds make players and players make playgrounds.

The dynamic and intricate synergy between the player and the playground that is constitutive of play provides educators a second place to intervene to help people fall into this mode of existing, namely, at playgrounds, with their defining qualities. Although a player is inseparable from her playground and vice versa, not every playground sends equally strong play invitations. As Kretchmar (1992) said, “even when the human spirit is ready and able, even when the active condition of readiness has been satisfied, potential play environments can remain mute, dead, seemingly uncooperative” (p. 6). Educators can do a great deal to promote inviting, calling, provoking, and cooperative playgrounds—ones whose invitations are replete of delightful magnetism. In other words, as a necessary component of the evolution of play, playgrounds and their capacity to foster novel autotelic meaningful expressions have to be taken seriously.

Potent play calls and messages do not come from any single kind of environment. In order to promote play, teachers have to recognize and respect the diversity of playgrounds. The understanding of play based on the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty indicates that this phenomenon can appear anywhere, anytime, anyplace. In this sense, and referring to the schooling system, it is important to emphasize the fact that despite traditional stereotypes, art, English, mathematics,

and science are as likely candidates to be considered fine playgrounds as is physical education. I see no reason to consider any of these potential playgrounds as inherently superior or inferior. All of them, it would seem, hold a similar potential to foster the kind of exquisite secrecy and enchantment known in play.

It turns out that what matters in determining the quality of a playground is not what *it is* all about but what *it can become* for the player. It matters not so much what subject matter or activity students are engaged in but which kind of calls for captivating, interesting, and meaningful transactions the environment presents. What is important is that players are provided with and invited to taste opportunities, make connections, and perceive multiple directions in the playground. Rather than assuming that some academic projects—philosophy or chemistry for example—are non-playful in nature, teachers have to realize that most all environments have potential to become fertile soil for play. School benches, baseball diamonds, chemistry or computer labs, and libraries are all eligible for and legitimate sites where students are at risk to find or be found by play. If teachers and students acknowledge and respect the diversity of playgrounds, play can appear and evolve in terrains from which it has been systematically excluded.

Having recognized that the quality of playgrounds reside in their capacity to allow acceptance but also transformation, I will suggest strategies to promote and maintain good play sites. I think that in order to promote meaningful

autotelic satisfaction, playgrounds have to be sensitive and responsive to the skill level of players. That is, playgrounds invitations have to be matched to the players' capacity to interact with them. Players are not going to be intrinsically motivated very long if they are unable to navigate the mysteries of the playgrounds. Teachers have to introduce players to the secrets of playgrounds, taking into account their capacities *to see* and *do*. The qualities of playgrounds can overwhelm but also *underwhelm* children. In other words, a playground can be too simplistic or too demanding. In either case, children might lose interest in the playground, for the play invitation perishes when playgrounds become too boring or too threatening respectively. Teachers have to avoid these two extremes and construct playgrounds whose play calls keep children within. In short, playgrounds have to speak to children.

The always delicate balance between playgrounds' invitations and children's skills is not the only tension that teachers have to artfully manipulate to promote play in education. In addition to avoiding extreme simplicity and complexity, teachers need to maintain a balance between familiarity and novelty. Children are often captured and seduced by playgrounds in which they feel both comfort and challenge. The play siren has to be recognized but also poignant enough so students venture to the playground in order to explore the uncertainties made possible by their already lived and learnt certainties. Good playgrounds remind but are not monotonous; they are improvisational but do not paralyze. I suggest that teachers make playgrounds flexible, for if play invitations

are wholly repetitious, they tend to disappear. Similarly, if playgrounds are a total uncharted territory, they do not hold the player. Every visit to a playground should be dynamic enough to let students feel at home while increasing complexity is discovered and successfully handled.

Playgrounds whose treasures are discovered and exhausted in one or few visits do not favor the evolution of play. On the contrary, rich playgrounds offer more than one gate of access and more than one path to follow. Those play environments that deplete their power of seduction after a brief period of time soon become boring and merely repetitious. This does not mean that repetition is a foe of play. Nothing could be further from the truth. Repetition is welcome as far as it permits acquaintance with the play environment so discovery and transformation are possible. Potent play calls generate and maintain a double perspective in the player: the perspective of the connoisseur and the perspective of the rookie. That is, players have to experience that they are operating in a familiar terrain that is ever expanding. On the one hand, advanced players recognize that their expertise is always provisional. On the other hand, beginning players also live their possibilities as temporal. Teachers have to promote playgrounds in which players are connoisseurs who never stop being rookies.

It should be clear by now that good playgrounds require a great deal of care and maintenance; for if they are to remain interesting, alive, and sources of messages, they cannot be lived as finished projects. Playgrounds need

continual adjustments and modifications. The difficulty with which teachers have to deal is that rich playgrounds have to generate a fine balance between familiarity and novelty. Playgrounds which fail to do so become redundant or simply mute. The art of the teacher is, then, to design play environments that facilitate at the very same time intimacy and serendipity. Is it possible for teachers to plan and construct environments in which the aptitude to make desirable and intrinsically meaningful discoveries almost by accident occur? My answer is a qualified affirmation. Rich play environments are possible in education only if teachers themselves see in their own professional practices the possibility to play and also make play. If teachers standardized their play invitations, by making consistent use of pedagogical recipes, and treat play as a distraction, play often will not follow.

In this section I have advanced several ideas to further the emergence of play in children's education that focus on the quality of playgrounds. First, it was reiterated that players and playgrounds exist together and that an alteration in either one pole profoundly affect the other. With this in mind, it was suggested that every subject matter and school activity could be lived in the mode of play. The matter is not only the features of the playground but also what the playground as a whole can become for the player. In this regard, the quality of playgrounds influence the way students play. Good quality playgrounds, I propose, should speak to the children's capacity to interact with them. If the situation proposed is lived as too easy or too difficult to handle or resolve,



intrinsic motivation and interest vanish. Also, it was mentioned that playgrounds should maintain a balance between familiarity and novelty. Finally, I suggested that teachers themselves have to live and believe in the value of playful practices, for sustaining rich play sites requires dedication and love. When playgrounds do not have attention, they become fixed and uninteresting. Rich playgrounds are always on the move.

While I was writing this dissertation I tried to apply my findings and suggestions to cultivate play all the way through. I was very fortunate to have had the possibility to develop parts of this study in such diverse and wonderful places as Buenos Aires, Argentina; Olympia, Greece, and State College, Pennsylvania; Kent, Ohio; and Brockport, New York in the United States. Throughout my philosophic journey I have fallen in the play spirit quite often. However, if I were to choose a playground where I can practice, embody, and show what this dissertation is all about, I would close these pages, get out of the chair, and rush to some places in which I have been experientially reassured that mysterious and magical things happen. And this is, precisely, what I am going to do right now. So long.

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## VITA

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Cesar R. Torres is currently an assistant professor in the Department of Physical Education and Sport at the State University of New York College at Brockport. In 2000 he was an instructor in the School of Exercise, Leisure and Sport at Kent State University. From 1997 to 1999 he was a teaching assistant in the Department of Kinesiology at the Pennsylvania State University. Prior to moving to the United States in 1996, he spent 10 years teaching K-12 physical education and was a part time lecturer at the National Institute of Physical Education. He also worked 7 years for the Argentine National Baseball Team and participated in international tournaments including South American and Pan-American Games.

Cesar R. Torres actively participates in professional organizations such as the International Association for the Philosophy of Sport, the North American Society for Sport History, and the International Olympic Academy. He has published in journals including the *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport*, *Olympika: The International Journal of Olympic Studies*, and *The International Journal of the History of Sport*. He has given presentations in numerous national and international academic conferences.