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HILDE HEIN

Play as an Aesthetic Concept

THE CLASSIC PLAY THEORY of art is expounded by Friedrich Schiller in his *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*.¹ He contends that man, as well as some of the other animals, possesses a primary "play impulse" which, when stimulated by superabundant energy, manifests itself in the free, non-utilitarian exercise of his various faculties. Characteristically human play, as distinct from that of lower animals, is expression intermediary between our purely sensuous, animal nature and our formal or purely rational nature. As a synthesis of both the sensuous and formal impulses, play cancels the authority of both and liberates man physically and morally. In the play experience man's dual nature is harmonized and humanized.

Aesthetic activity (and by this Schiller refers to the contemplative rather than the creative experience) is the highest form of play, being primarily the free exercise of the imaginative and intellectual faculties rather than the physical.

Schiller's doctrine of play may be briefly summarized as follows: a) Play originates as the natural and spontaneous expression of a primary instinct activated by the overflow of vital energy. b) Play consists in the functioning of faculties in the fashion to which they are normally adapted, cognitive as well as physical, but without the compulsion of either internal pressures or external demands. In this respect

play is properly contrasted with work, which is stimulated by deprivation and is engaged in as a means to a practical end. c) Play has both intrinsic and extrinsic value. The activity itself is pleasurable and is enjoyed for its own sake. But in so far as it is conducive to the liberation of the human spirit and to man's voluntary submission to self-imposed law, it contributes to the moral enhancement of the individual and of society. This is the basis of the pedagogic value of play, and, while it is an incidental consequence of play and not directly included in the motivation of the player, it appears to be the focus of Schiller's interest in the phenomenon of play. d) Schiller does not clearly articulate the relationship between art and play, but it appears to be essentially a genetic one. Both art and play are manifestations of the play impulse, but aesthetic activity is the gratuitous exercise of higher level, i.e., intellectual, faculties. Possibly it is a more mature or complex form of play. Consequently it also has a higher moral value than play; and play turns out to be a kind of apprenticeship to the aesthetic appreciation of the beautiful, which, in turn, is a stepping stone to morality.

The play theory as so formulated is an unsatisfactory aesthetic doctrine. Neither play nor aesthetic activity is clearly illuminated and the difference between them remains obscure. But the primary deficiency of the theory appears to me to be the fact that the alleged value of play lies in a feature which is not merely nonessential but is in fact in direct conflict with the

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essential nature of play. If play by definition is spontaneous activity engaged in exclusively for its own sake, then to value it for its possible consequences is a denial of its essence. A thing may have both intrinsic and extrinsic value, but not if the definition of that thing precludes either one. Gold, for example, is valued both for its own beauty and for what it can purchase.

Despite its weaknesses, however, I believe that a theory which associates play with aesthetic activity has features to recommend it. Such an association has a long historical tradition which predates the specific doctrine of Schiller.

Both Plato and Aristotle believed in the genetic connection between play and art. They regarded play as sensuous in character and as a natural expression of animal restlessness. As such, it was not necessary to rationality, which was regarded as the essential nature of man, but it was also not necessarily antagonistic to rationality. Its characteristic imitateness and immediately pleasurable quality could be put to the service of education. It could be used to good or to evil ends, but was in itself non-serious and of little consequence. Aristotle saw in play a recreational and cathartic function which, on the level of art, also had some social value. It was conducive to the removal of impediments to rationality, but not in itself a means to rationality.

By the beginning of the nineteenth century, however, the non-rational facet of man had assumed greater importance, and play came to be viewed not as a trivial expression of the non-rational but as a possible bridge or integrating force between the two sides of man. Kant and Schiller stress the orderly rather than the imitative character of play and view it as a necessary, if not sufficient, condition of the lawful self-determination which constitutes rationality.

Schiller's contrast between work and play and his suggestion that play was initiated by the overflow of surplus energy was taken up by Spencer² and given an evolutionary twist. Play is possible according to Spencer only for an organism which has reached a level of biological organiza-

tion so efficient that it does not expend all its energy in securing bare survival. The remaining energy can be freely and "wastefully" spent in immediately pleasurable exercise. Aesthetic activity is the play of the higher, more complex faculties and is found only among animals at a high stage of evolutionary advancement.

But implicit in the evolutionary hypothesis is the principle that those qualities which survive do have survival value. The expenditure of energy in play and aesthetic activity must then yield rewards beyond itself. A teleological orientation was attributed to play by the later evolutionists, particularly by Karl Groos³ and Konrad Lange.⁴ They denied Schiller's special play impulse but agreed that play involves the discharge of surplus energy. It is, they thought, functional in the maturation of our ordinary instinctual processes.

Play has been variously characterized as a pre-training, preparing the organism for the serious activities of life (Groos), as a "conscious self-deception" enabling the organism to compensate by make-believe for the disappointments and frustrations of ordinary life (Lange), and as a kind of safety valve enabling the organism to discharge the emotions which experience generates but for which it provides no adequate outlet (Lange). These views stress the imitative nature of play less than its fictitiousness and the creative freedom which was also emphasized, but in a different context, by Kant and Schiller. They acknowledge, too, the pleasurable quality of play, but they deny that it is engaged in for the sake of such pleasure.⁵ Play is not the aimless release of excess energy, but is a response to deeply rooted biological and psychological needs. Nonetheless, it is properly contrasted to work, because its satisfactions transcend the minimal demands of bare survival.

But the needs which play and aesthetic activity fulfill are not exclusively biological, nor is their satisfaction always pleasurable in an immediate sense. This fact was recognized by Freud,⁶ and his analysis of play has been elaborated by later schools of psychoanalytic theory.⁷ Psychoanalysts

point out that since excess may be as painful as deficiency, the purging of surplus energy may be only superficially described as a joyous and spontaneous expression of vital freedom. The readiness with which our play activities repeat life experiences which were in fact unpleasant and the distortion to which they are submitted expose the inadequacy of any simple analysis of play in terms of imitation or aimless pleasure-seeking or instinctive satisfaction of biological needs. Play is regarded as an assimilative activity by means of which circumstantial impediments are overcome and the agent gains active mastery of a situation which he has passively undergone. Thus play is a form of conquest, and this is the basis of the pleasure derived from it. As such it is as serious as any of man's activities and as purposive in its nature as his work.

Aesthetic activity is an extension and universalization of play, performing durably for whole societies those benefits which play bestows temporarily upon the individual participants. It, too, is serious and conducive to survival in an expanded sense. Indeed the whole notion of its intrinsic value is called into question for in a world in which everyone were perfectly adapted to reality there would be no need for either play or art and no pleasure derivable from them. A true characterization of play, and derivatively of aesthetic activity, consequently opposes them not to work or to the practical or serious, but to *the real*. Play provides a means of escaping reality and therein lies its value. I believe that this notion of the fundamental unreality of play is an important insight, and I shall discuss it further later.

Some of the historical discrepancies between analyses of play can be explained by the fact that their proponents were employing different models of play activity. If one concentrates upon the relatively uncoordinated movements of infants, one may well overlook the formal, often highly intellectual features which are pertinent to rule-determined games such as chess. The imitative element which is present in such activities as "playing house" is far less in evidence in organized team sports. The term *play* has been used so loosely as

to refer to almost any activity which the agent engages in without compulsion and with some pleasure. This usage suggests that play is not a particular kind of activity, but an activity engaged in under certain circumstances and with a particular attitude. Depending upon which model one considers, one will emerge with widely diverging notions of how play originates, what its essential nature may be, and what, if any, consequences follow from it.

It is noteworthy that one can find an existing aesthetic theory distinct from the play theory itself corresponding to any model of play, e.g., formalism, the expression theory, imitation. I take this to be an argument in favor of the association of play with aesthetic activity despite the shortcomings of the play theory itself.

The historical points of agreement, such as they are, among those theories which affirm a correlation between play and aesthetic activity largely concern the genetic relations between them. Play is regarded as a natural and spontaneous form of animal expression, with or without a special instinct, and aesthetic activity is a higher form of the same thing. *Higher* may mean more rational, more complex, more universalized; but on all views this ranking tends to have a moral connotation. Aesthetic activity is morally superior to play.

The moral factor is all-pervasive. Even those theories which stress the non-purposiveness or autotelic nature of play and of art still subordinate the former to the latter on what turns out to be a moral scale. This preoccupation with the moral tends to obscure all other relations between play and aesthetic activity.

One view which is not subject to this confusion is that of J. Huizinga⁸ who avoids all reductive analyses of play in terms of need satisfactions or instrumentality to ends. He maintains that there is a primitive and non-reducible play instinct to which not merely art but essentially all forms of human culture may be attributed. He regards the "fun" element as the essential feature of play, and contrasts it with the serious and the coerced, but his concept of play is broad enough to include such instances as those in which things

as serious as honor and life may be at stake, and pleasure is not the primary objective. Summing up the characteristics of play, he defines it as:

... 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.'⁹

Huizenga's definition seeks to, and I believe does comprehend the vast range of activities which are commonly designated as play. If anything, it may be too narrow, but the formal, the gratuitous, the autotelic features are all acknowledged, and so is a quality which seems to me to be more definitive than all of these and which I believe is the true bond between the playful and the aesthetic. This is the quality of unreality referred to above. I prefer now to call this a detachment from reality.

Play activities are, of course, real in the sense that they exist in the real world. A football game involves real people and real objects as much as an automobile accident does. But the first is unreal in a sense which I believe has been germinally implied by the theories which have been considered. To regard play as imitative is to treat it as an unreal representation of reality. That the representation must closely resemble the object is easily refuted by an appeal to experience. The view that all play is make-believe is more liberal than the imitation theory and more plausible. It also lays greater stress on the unreality of what is pretended. But it implies a conscious imaginative activity which I think is not essential to play. Make-believe, only somewhat less forcibly than pretending, implies that there is something which is believed. But while the rules of chess may in fact be stylized laws of ancient warfare, the players play with a board and pieces and do not imagine themselves to be engaged in a war. They need entertain no beliefs about war whatsoever, however aggressive their playing may be. Where make-believe is intended, the reality from which it departs is borne in consciousness;

were it not, the activity would be psychotic, not playful.

Theories which stress the formal element of play also presuppose its unreality, but they focus upon the mode of achieving it rather than upon its content. For it is by imposing artificial restrictions upon reality that we obtain unreality. Thus any activity upon being ritualized or set into a formal context thereby becomes playful. The formal limitations may be defined by social conventions, as in a game, or arbitrarily and perhaps secretly by the agent himself.

This means that the unreality of play is a relative matter, varying with one's particular idea of reality. And this is why an action in which I engage playfully may be viewed by you as serious or real. This also explains how, regardless of consequences, what is work to one individual may be play to another or even to the same one on a different occasion.

This distinction between the real and the unreal overlaps to some extent with the distinction between activities pursued for their own sake and those carried out for the sake of some external objective, but the two are not entirely congruous, for an action may very well be done for the sake of its practical consequences and still be playful. We do not need to question the intentions of a group of children playing in a school yard, although they may very well be simply obeying the teacher or perfecting certain feats of coordination or working up an appetite for lunch. There is no doubt that they are playing. Furthermore, if only those actions which are performed for their own sake or for no reason at all qualify as play, I would suspect that there is very little of it and still less that is fun.

Since we do not all share the same sense of reality, we sometimes misunderstand each other's actions. In fact the boundaries are rarely precise, and this accounts too for our confusion with respect to such cases as the athlete who turns professional or the pathological gambler. In these cases there is no need to assume a decrease in pleasure or a change in motivation, but

rather an autonomous phase of the agent's existence has been merged into his real life.

Play is not exhaustively described as unreal, nor does the characterization apply to it alone. It is just the fact that it has this quality in common with aesthetic activity and, perhaps, with a number of other activities, that makes the project of exploring the one in terms of the other worth-while.

Aesthetic contemplation may or may not be spontaneous; it may or may not be immediately agreeable; it may involve the voluntary subordination of our sensuous to our rational faculties. But it need not be any of these things. It does require an artificial distinction between our present activity and our ordinary sense of reality. This may be referred to as assuming the aesthetic attitude, but that is merely to give it a label. It is not the same as being disinterested or suspending belief, for there need be no change in our interests and beliefs. But there is a differentiation within our experience which may be collapsed, just as in the case of play, by borderline incidents. I would suggest that pornography and commercial art might be test cases, instances where contemplation does not really lead one to seductions or to super-markets but only to a breakdown of our reality distinctions.

I do not mean to revive the theory that aesthetic activity is reducible to play or

the reverse, but only to suggest that the long tradition of associating the two activities is well founded. I believe that our understanding of art and of aesthetic experience might profit from an elaboration and clarification of the concept of play. I suggest further that despite their discrepancies, the various existing analyses of play do implicitly agree in acknowledging its fundamental character of unreality. But the precise nature of this unreality and, correlatively, of reality is yet to be more clearly defined.

¹ (New Haven, Conn., 1954); see especially Letter XXVIII.

² Herbert Spencer, *Principles of Psychology*, Vol. II.

³ Karl Groos, *The Play of Man* (New York, 1916).

⁴ Konrad Lange, *Das Wesen der Kunst*, in Rader, *A Modern Book of Esthetics*, 3rd. ed (New York).

⁵ Exception must be made for the "functional pleasure" theory of Karl Buhler, according to which play is nontelic and is engaged in purely out of delight in the natural functioning of one's own faculties: *Die Geistige Entwicklung des Kindes* (Jena, 1930).

⁶ S. Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920); *A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis* (1924).

⁷ Phylis Greenacre, "Play in Relation to Creative Imagination," *The Psycho-analytic Study of the Child*, XIV (1959); R. Waelder "The Psychoanalytic Theory of Play," *Psa. Quart.*, II (1932); F. Alexander, "A Contribution to the Theory of Play," *Psa. Quart.*, XXVII (1958).

⁸ J. Huizenga, *Homo Ludens* (Boston, 1962).

⁹ J. Huizenga, p. 28.