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ONTOLOGICAL POSSIBILITIES: SPORT AS PLAY
by
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It is often thought that play and sport are highly, if not totally, incompatible. The competitive projects of sport stand at odds with the freedom, spontaneity and lack of seriousness thought to be characteristic of play. The extreme goal orientation of sport, including the drive to win, the quest for honor and the thirst for excellence, seems to beg a work, not a play, orientation. It is more correct to say, so the argument runs, that one works sport, not plays sport.

In this paper an opposing viewpoint is presented. It is maintained that the competitive fullness of sport and the play gesture are, in a most fundamental sense, wholly compatible but not coextensive. One can play sport without compromising elements essential to this highly polarized activity.

The starting point of this analysis is the identification of a given experience which has been lived in its fundamental aspects repeatedly. This phenomenon, including the two aspects of playing and that which is played (sport), is taken as the datum for subsequent scrutiny. Thus, the question suggested by the title—Ontological Possibilities: Sport as Play—is not one of sport as play or as something-other-than-play, but a question of the nature of sport as one mode of play. An attempt is made to reduce the play and agnostic elements to fundamental levels and reveal their relationship. The only “conclusions” drawn are descriptions of sport as play, namely—opposition as play and physically strategic opposition as play.

Some may wish to argue that taking a starting point with a given phenomenon is unwarranted. Each time that one steps onto a ball diamond, so the critique might run, he experiences many different phenomena. Sometimes he’s happy, sometimes sad, sometimes highly competitive and sometimes noncompetitive. How can a given phenomenon be taken as sport in the play realm? But the phenomenon identified is a reality whether or not persons encounter it frequently or infrequently in certain social settings. One can identify a distinctive cognition and can be “... aware of the object as being the same as that which (he) may expect to be aware of in a future experience, as the same as that which, generally speaking, (he) may be aware of in an indefinite number of presentative acts.” Thus, the lack of concern for establishing the identity of sport as play on a majority report of lived experience in a given social setting indicates that the reality of the phenomenon to be described does not depend upon social observation. Agreement is found with Willard who stated that “... cognizance is just as cold and hard a fact, is just as much a phase of reality, as is the growth of a tree, the chemical composition of water, or the motion of a planet.”

But it could be argued at this point that if one identifies a phenomenon for analysis, the very identification thereof presupposes a knowledge of that datum. Any subsequent analysis would be nothing more than the gratuitous activity of
describing that which was already known. However, an ability to identify a phenomenon is quite distinct from an ability to fully describe it. One can, as it were, pick many things out of a crowd without being able, in their absence, to describe them. This draws attention to two kinds of knowing (the traditional distinction between “knowing how” and “knowing that”). Thus the identification of a phenomenon does not preclude the possibility of describing the yet obscure or unknown.

An important aspect of the present procedure involves “bracketing” the phenomenon. An attempt is made to gain an access to the datum which is uncontaminated by social, psychological or biological bias. The phenomenon is “disconnected” from the context in which one lives it for the purpose of “seeing” it more clearly. A search is made for the very roots of its intelligibility. While one has no assurance that the “bracketed” phenomenon is ever fully described, the analysis is one which “transcends” the accidents of particular situations in favor of more general distinctions and connections.

A consideration of this stance in relationship to several others which have confronted the issues of sport, play and/or games may help to clarify the rationale for the aforementioned procedure. Neale, Callois and Schiller produced descriptions of play which, while they may be compatible with one another, have not been reduced to their possible common bases. Neale, speaking from a psychological standpoint, stated that play is adventure which itself is composed of freedom, delight, illusion, and peace. Callois in surveying the relationship between play and other social forms of behavior indicated that play “... remains separate, inclosed, in principle devoid of important repercussions upon the solidarity and continuity of collective and institutional life.” Finally, Schiller, from an aesthetic standpoint, stated, “We must therefore do justice to those who pronounce the beautiful, and the disposition in which it places the mind, as entirely indifferent and unprofitable, in relation to knowledge and feeling.”

The question must then be put: in terms of these three perspectives, is there an identifiable common base? While each description provides a broad foundation which itself would support numerous particular lived experiences or social interactions, the analyses still leave important questions unanswered. For example, on what basis is illusion, unimportance and indifference intelligible? One can reduce the experiences further and more fully describe them.

The procedure employed in this paper requires that one begin with his lived experience and as such diverges radically from a second approach to the issues surrounding sport as play, namely—the biological and biologically-based psychological theories. Schiller and subsequently Spenser’s notion of play as a manifestation of excess energy, Lazarus view of play as recovery from work, Hall’s recapitulation theory and Groos teleological concept of play as preparation for adult life are representative of this standpoint. While this is not the place to critique each theory separately several possible problems relative to this general approach should be noted.

First, the biological criteria for play are “realities” which cannot be experienced or lived. One does not confront genetic operations or purposeful biological mechanisms but things such as colors, shapes, bats, balls, joy and anxiety.
Curiously, play is defined as something which has to be present (e.g. recapitulation) but which cannot be experienced. As Groos stated, “Animals cannot be said to play because they are young and frolicsome, but rather they have a period of youth in order to play (emphasis his); for only by so doing can they supplement the insufficient hereditary endowment with individual experience, in view of the comings tasks of life.”

Groos subsequently is forced to talk of the “conscious accompaniments” of play though they be fundamentally irrelevant to the question of what play is. That which is closest to man, his sensations and cognitions, are discounted in favor of that which is inaccessible to him but which, on scientific grounds, has to be present.

Second, it should be noted that those who identify play on biological bases must presuppose a given descriptive knowledge of that object. Otherwise, how could Groos, for example, claim that play is teleological necessity? How could he ever discover instances of play? How would he know play when he saw it? Clearly, a descriptive understanding is a prerequisite to a scientific hypothesis. Too often this prerequisite is ignored or only incompletely acknowledged.

Finally, but still very importantly, these theories characterize play in contrast to work or serious adult life. Particularly in the cases of Lazarus’ notion of play as recovery from work and Groos’ play as preparation for adult life, play is seen as a partner to work. In essence, play, in these characterizations, is highly utilitarian. It marks the accomplishment of tasks as important as those of work itself. A possible conclusion to be drawn from this juxtaposition of work and play is that such “play” is indeed itself work. “Play” too stands as a major contributor to the actualization of important human ends.

A non-biologically-based correlate of this utilitarian notion of play is Walsh’s description of play as that which is useful in returning man to a recognition of his “possibilities.” Play is a means, a way of reinstating man in Being-in-the-World. How ironic it is that he accuses the compulsive “worker” of an inability to view play as anything but purposeless when it is precisely the compulsive worker who cannot conceive of play in anything but terms of utility. Again, play is viewed as crucially functional in relationship to valued objectives.

Another approach is that taken by Wittgenstein who claimed that a consideration of games produces understandings labeled “family resemblances.” He entreats the reader to “look” at a variety of games and acknowledge the fact that he finds nothing common to all but only similarities and relationships.

Granted, with Wittgenstein’s starting point given, one must, if he looks at a great enough variety of games, find exceptions to even the best prospective common elements. But the question remains as to how Wittgenstein can so readily describe the “presence” or “absence” of phenomena such as amusement, patience and competition. Are these “proceedings” themselves characterized by “family resemblances”? If so, his descriptions themselves rest upon uncertain, broad similarities. And even if this presents no difficulty, the fact that phenomena are discounted because they are not always “present” in certain culturally-defined social settings seems beside the point in terms of the reality of one’s cognizance of amusement, competition or whatever. Patience, for example,
is no less a reality by virtue of its occasional presence in given existential situations.

With this incomplete description of the method and expectations of this paper and an analysis of some previous alternate procedures, the more substantive portion of the paper must be started. The reductive analysis may strike an initial roadblock as one turns his reflective glance toward play. Play is elusive. One might assume from looking at several previous analyses that this cognition must be characterized as a delimited void. In other words, play has often been described in terms of what it is not. Play is not serious, not real, dis-connected, non-productive, un-necessary and so forth. But what is left? To perform a reduction on this basis would be to convert one void into a more sophisticated absence. One must eventually turn his reflections toward that which play is.

Let us take, for purposes of analysis, participation in a basketball game. As a player I may first be struck by the fact that not as much seems to be “at stake” as there was while performing as, one might say, a beginning college professor. I experience a freedom of separation from worldly concerns. Most obviously, this recreational contest does not involve large sums of money, my financial well-being. But I may immediately sense that this is a rather provincial understanding of supposed distinctive realms of activity. Apart from the difficulty of distinguishing between that which is personally necessary and that which is not, it would seem that whatever the object desired, whether or not it can be shown to be biologically necessary, psychologically critical or socially important, I encounter a fundamentally identical motif. Here I stand, to put it graphically, and there “stands” the object of my desire, perhaps this time, companionship the next or victory the next. In all cases a something “out there” as yet unsecured, as yet not part of myself hangs in the balance of my thrusts toward it. Despite the fact that, as a player, can feel that the game has no impact on my “real” life, that it is being played “for itself,” I may still stand in wanting relationship to a particular object—victory, glory, or happiness, to name a few. It would seem that the variously-defined “necessary-unnecessary” distinction characterizing work and play respectively is essentially one motif. Removing the biological, sociological and psychological bases for distinguishing the relative value of different projects, I am left with projects of an identical character, namely—gestures aimed at securing that which is not mine.

My unique cognizance of a freedom from as much being at stake must then be based upon something other than a separation from the various “real necessities” catalogued above. When I remove the bases for that bogus distinction I seem to be left with a plain lack of anything missing, or to put it in more positive terms, a fullness or plenitude. The foundation which gives my cognizance distinctiveness is not freedom from certain necessities (for that may still be essentially an orientation toward the missing) but simply freedom from absence. Fullness is incompatible with the missing. Fullness is incompatible with anything which will serve as a complement, “savior” or deliverer. Fullness is, however, intelligible in relationship to expression, response or testimony.

One might come at this understanding obliquely from another common experience of his activity, that of a unique temporality. I see the game clock on
the wall. The clock serves as an indication that my participation will terminate after forty minutes of play. This constitutes the highly arbitrary temporal boundaries to which I commit myself in the contest. Without needing to, why would I engage in the activity of basketball for forty minutes? Furthermore, during the game I will stop and start time by calling “time outs” and subsequently resuming play. “Real time,” it seems, is not lived in relationship to such arbitrary ventures, and it cannot be so readily manipulated through many “stops” and “starts”. This may be taken by myself as a distinctive characteristic of play.

But again I can intuit a possible identity between this conception of play time and “ordinary” or work time. Time in either case can be considered as a construction or fabrication in response to an incompleteness which change is destined to remedy. In other words, I posit a “sometime” (either a continuity toward a future objective or an historical event) in recognition of my present relative destitution. This temporality can be constructed, in principle, as easily in response to the change required to gain a victory as it is to the change needed to gain happiness, financial security or prestige.

Time as continuity is invented when something is seen as “moving” toward a specific culmination. Fink17 spoke of this teleological phenomenon in terms of the striving of a fragmented being for, in his case, Eudaimonia. Man, according to Fink, emphasizes the future because it is that which will permit the realization of his objectives.18 This time is irreversible. It is the flight forward to a not yet actualized status. As Berger described this alternative, “Having opted for time I would think that plenitude ought to be conquered within time.”19 The clock time of the game and the work time of futures of fruition are, in the sense mentioned here, essentially identical.

Thus, my distinctive cognition must be based upon a radically different conception of time, a time which is not, as has been shown, validly described in terms of artificiality, arbitrariness or “time-in-time-outs.” This reduced awareness of time must acknowledge change (otherwise we have a congealed eternity) but change which is not constructed around a specific sometime. The temporality recognized from this standpoint is a “presence”20 or a “thick present.”21 It is the catching of a fly ball as the catching of a fly ball, not as a temporal point in a constructed chain of events which leads to victory. It is the drive for a layup as a drive for a layup.

Time as a “thick present” includes acts which are more expressions than strivings. The present stands in relationship to no specific time of fruition. It does not serve as that construction which “carries” man to fulfillment. Thus, my implicit acknowledgement of presence in the act of playing basketball clarifies that act as an expression or, in the more religious terminology of Neale, a celebration. As Berger stated a similar idea, “Time is no longer a milieu in which I work and which encloses me but that of which I have something to make, and my acts are much less works than testimonies.”22

To conclude, the artificial time of games can yet be the constructed time leading to a sometime of victory, glory or “total bliss.” This time is identical to work time which likewise provides continuity toward a presently desired and
Presently lacking status. Play time is a simple “birth and death” which issues from fullness.

I can take a third common orientation toward my participation in basketball. I notice that the game includes artificial spatial boundaries. Black lines outline the court. Play space exists only within those lines. I might conclude that these boundaries partially or wholly constitute the uniqueness of play. In the “real” world I encounter no such lines, but only boundaries which signify utility. I do not, in my work world, place myself within artificial spaces which, for utilitarian ends, need not be there. But if I ignore the court lines, may I still maintain my unique cognition of space? It seems so.

To take the position of the antithesis first, one may intuit a possible identity between certain activity in artificially-bound space and work space. This space is dislocated. It is space forever related to an “over there” or a “somewhere.” Whether it be a basketball player who feels “lost” in not occupying an appropriate location or a businessman who must trek to another city to close a deal, the actor stands dislocated, in relationship to another place. Thus, the ball-player and business-man may occupy identical spatiality; they both acknowledge a specific inappropriateness or incompleteness relative to their location.

The reduced phenomenon is one of man with location not dislocation. In distinction to the dichotomous spatiality without a locus, play space is full locatedness. It is space with a focal point or center. It is the full location of expression. It is the location under the basket as location under the basket, not a locale which is one point among many other points.

Play space is open space because it has a focal point. It is not “‘in debt” to other places. It does not “stand” as a place on a path of places. It cannot be understood, in short, in terms of number. It is the full and open “here-with-there” as opposed to a “here” in relationship to a specific number or “there’s.”

To this point play has been identified as resting upon a base of fullness or plenitude and has been described in two of its manifestations, temporality and spatiality. The fullness of play grounds acts of a different order from those based upon incompleteness. The play act, to expand upon one of Neale’s points, might be called “adventuring” in the sense that it is not a curtailed thrust toward specific ends. It is abstaining from “writing the script” before the fact. It is facing the unexpected. It is surprise. It is testifying spontaneously to one’s fullness regardless of the extenuating circumstances in a particular life situation (e.g. one might be taking a terrific beating in a basketball game). It is the courage to remain open to one’s possibilities.

Analysis must now be turned more specifically to sport so that compatibility between playing and that which it intends (sport) can be described. My teammates and I face five opponents on the basketball court and attempt to keep them from scoring while we thwart their inhibitory thrusts toward us.

One’s first reaction, in light of the previous analysis of play, might be that play in connection with the opposition of sport would force an emasculation of the latter phenomenon. Opposition seems to require the notion of an opponent who stands, as it were, between myself and the coveted victory. If I am successful in overcoming the opponent, the prize is mine. But the prize re-
mains, during the contest, an object which I lack; it is won only in the sometime if I reach a sufficient number of strategic “somewhere's.” Those who compete are, by definition, the unfulfilled, the fragmented individuals who contest with one another precisely to rectify this situation. In short, it may appear that opposition, to retain its competitive fullness, must fall into a work motif.

Judgment, however, must be suspended until a more careful examination of opposition is pursued. What is required to maintain the intelligibility of opposition? First, I recognize the importance of my opponents. But are those specific five people necessary? Certainly those five individuals could as easily be another group, and it seems that the actual presence of people themselves may not be required. I can compete as readily, in essence, against myself in striving to make a greater number of shots from a certain place than I did yesterday. I oppose, in a sense, a phantom adversary whose presence is implicit in the record (either actual or hypothetical) to which I attend. Thus, if the actual presence of other persons is not necessary, I must still recognize, at minimum, some variable other distinct from self. A fundamental dichotomy presents itself. I cannot, in short, think of opposition without considering that which is opposed.

It is most important to note that this other need not be that which I want to become or that which threatens my acquiring something else which I lack. This point needs to be argued. Beside the self-evident fact that the oppositional dichotomy must be a variable one (I must change in my attempts to oppose you, and you must change—either actually as I face you or virtually through your record to which I attend—to oppose me). I cannot oppose an inanimate object such as a mountain. Opposition seems to require the presence of theme. The polarities of the dichotomy require that which will assure intersection. Theme is often manifest in spatial, temporal and intentional phenomena. We share a given space; we share a given time; we share a certain kind of project. Quite clearly the other in this dichotomy must be seen as a cooperator, as Suits,23 Fraleigh,24 and others have indicated, before opposition becomes intelligible. A view of the other, at least in terms of this prerequisite of theme, as the embodiment of something which I want to become or as that which holds me in my possible incompleteness is not required.

But this intersecting, variable dichotomy betrays another characteristic, that of hindrance. It is here that the apparent incompatibility between full play and full opposition seems to shine through most brightly. When one considers hindrance he must think of hindrance from something. In basketball I am hindered from either scoring points or blocking other persons' attempts to do the same. In this sense opposition does include a recognition of the not-yet completed or negotiated. If this is the only way in which I can understand hindrance, then I am indeed blocked from that which will complete me, that which constitutes my fullfillment. If this is the only way in which I can understand hindrance, then I am condemned to perpetual working sport toward satisfaction.

Such a recognition of hindrance serves as a reminder that I may remain forever discordant, fragmentary or insufficient. Hindrance blocks the path to the sometime, somewhere or something of the work world. It threatens my urgent projects.
Paradoxically this hindrance is still necessary in the sense that it is required for the successful termination of the work-quest. Happiness cannot be gained unless one overcomes something, unless one prevails in spite of hindrance. Hindrance, therefore, is at once feared and needed.

Hindrance in this work ethos is a result of minimal sharing under the prerequisite of theme. Only those necessities which allow projecting polarities to intersect are in evidence. Cooperation is merely condoned as a means to an end. I cooperate with the other only in the extent to which it allows me to gain that which is lacking, that from which I am hindered.

But the question remains whether or not the made basket or successful block of another's shot need be only that which I lack, that which I am only hindered from. It seems that hindrance from is also a hindrance for and that under this notion the compatibility of play and opposition becomes more apparent. I may be hindered from making baskets, but such hindrance allows me to express my testimony. I express myself with hindrance, not through or in spite of hindrance. It is valued for itself.

Hindrance in this mode is not threatening, for it blocks nothing which is lacking. It is rather to be preserved because continued testimony depends upon its presence. This does not suggest that I do not try to convert baskets. It merely indicates that "victory" is a continuously unfolding experience. It is my expression, not a pre-existent object which I somehow secure for myself.

Such hindrance also has implications for the concept of theme. Theme is not a minimal agreement but rather a maximal cooperation. The recognition is one of mutual dependence. I need the hindrance you can offer for my expression, and you need the hindrance I provide for your testimony. We do not have the ambivalence of the worker on a quest who needs us only to surpass us in his conquest, who both searches us out and fears us, who wants our resistance only to ultimately "annihilate" that force.

Metheny's discussion on the etymology of "contest" (a derivation of con and testare meaning to testify with) is instructive. When one testifies, he expresses or displays that which he has whether it be knowledge, physical prowess, faith or some other ability or trait. He "lays out" his particular or unique fullness. Thus, the physically contesting individual, in the true sense of the term, displays that which is his, his particular grace, his particular strength, his particular agility. In the contest, one is indeed hindered for.

Two motifs of opposition have been outlined, each one, in principle, equally intelligible in that dichotomy, variation, theme and hindrance are acknowledged. The work schema includes a characterization of the other (dichotomy) as minimally cooperative (variation-theme) and as that which stands between (hindrance) me and my objective. Victory or defeat is something distinct from my unfolding self which I, at a future time, gain. The other must be eliminated for my goal to be secured.

On the other hand the play impulse requires a characterization of the other (dichotomy) as fully and essentially cooperative (variation-theme) in the mode of inhibiting me (hindrance) for a certain expression. The hindering other needs to be preserved, for expression ends when a verdict is reached, when the other
is "destroyed" or when the other "destroys" me.

The analysis needs to be carried further to include a discussion of physical contributions to oppositional projects. I intuit, on the court, a certain relevancy in terms of my movements or static positions. I am too early, on time, too far downcourt or positioned correctly. Self as body is lived as strategic for changes desired.

It seems evident that relevancy could retain its nature of strategic relationship in either the play or work motif. My body limitedness temporally and spatially could be conceived of as strategic in terms of my desire to exhibit my particular fullness. Or this limitedness could be relevant in terms of a future objective.

As indicated above, my body relevancy in expression would be a relevancy in the "now," a becoming which paradoxically requires no construction of futures in which something is to be gained. Likewise my relevancy with regard to location is a relevancy for the "here," the locale of my unfolding expression. In psychological terminology this total experience of body relevancy in play can be described as "grace." Play relevancy is complete relevancy. There is no relationship to other changes needed.

My relevant temporal and spatial action in work, on the other hand, is relevancy related to the "not here" and the "not yet." Relevancy is understood as that which can be done as body, changes which can be provoked, conclusions which can be achieved. Relevancy is always incomplete relevancy. It stands in relationship to the unaccomplished.

In drawing these ideal distinctions between one's consciousness of play and work it is not being suggested that one's lived experience in any situation would include the pure content of one or the other phenomenon. In playing a ball game an individual's lived experience may be grounded in play one moment and in work the next. Likewise while "on the job" a person may alternate between playing and working and live the nuances of both.

In reflecting upon personal lived experiences in terms of the above analysis, we may have more difficulty discovering instances of full play than work. It seems that when we interact, even on the "play" field, we often stand in relationship to yet other things which are desired. We work at basketball to gain the victory; we work at jogging to feel better; we work at taking vacations to find relaxation.

The schema of opposition may be particularly vulnerable to the work motif because it provides an other which presents an image of hindrance. Our common response is to assume that hindrance stands in the way of something which we lack. We may encounter opposition at the office, for example, and respond to it in terms of self-preservation, self-advancement and self-gratification. Thus, many of us, even those in physical education and others who profess an allegiance to sport, have difficulty playing.

It may be significant that several theorists consider dance a more viable form for the manifestation of play. Huizinga stated this directly, "... dance. ... is always at all periods and with all peoples pure play, the purest and most perfect form of play that exists." And Van der Leeuw wrote, "When something
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matters in life, one feels festive; the expression of life becomes stylized into a fixed, rhythmical form.28 Or as Neale put it quite simply, "To play (emphasis mine) a game is to dance."29

Thus, it may be the rare performer who consistently plays sport, though on the basis of this analysis such an activity was found to be wholly intelligible. It is the playing sportsman whose cup "runneth over" and whose becoming is more an adventurous celebration than a determined quest.

FOOTNOTES

8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
11. The interested reader can find numerous critiques of the various play theories, several of which are contained within works listed among these footnotes.
16. Ibid., p. 326.
18. Ibid., p. 99.
22. Ibid., p. 199.
29. Ibid., p. 64.