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Life Is Play.

"Human opinions are children's toys." – Heraclitus (535-475 BC) *Fragments DK B70*

Lord Illingworth: *"The intellect is not a serious thing, and never has been. It is an instrument on which one plays, that is all.* – Oscar Wilde (1854-1900) from *An Ideal Husband*, Wentworth, p228

"Philosophy...starts from the sacred riddle game." – Huizinga (1872-1945), *Homo Ludens*, p175

"Every man and woman should spend life in this way, playing the most beautiful games" (Plato, *The Laws*, Book 7.803c)

"Man only plays when in the full meaning of the word he is a man, and he is only completely a man when he plays." – Schiller (1759-1805), Letter 15 in *Letters On The Aesthetic Education Of Man*.

"But what is work and what is not work? Is it work to dig, to carpenter, to plant trees, to fell trees, to ride, to fish, to hunt, to feed chickens, to play the piano, to take photographs, to build a house, to cook, to sew, to trim hats, to mend motor bicycles? All of these things are work to somebody, and all of them are play to somebody. There are in fact very few activities which cannot be classed either as work or play according as you choose to regard them."

George Orwell (1903-1950) from *The Road To Wigan Pier*, chapter 12.

*They said, "You have a blue guitar,
You do not play things as they are."*

*The man replied, "Things as they are
Are changed upon the blue guitar."* – Wallace Stevens (1879-1955) *The Man with the Blue Guitar*.

"We don't stop playing because we grow old; we grow old because we stop playing." – anon., usually ascribed to George Bernard Shaw, playwright. (1856-1950)

"All this twaddle, the existence of God, atheism, determinism, liberation, societies, death, etc., are pieces of a chess game called language, and they are amusing only if one does not preoccupy oneself with winning or losing." Marcel Duchamp, (1887-1968) p285 *The Box In A Valise*, trans. David Britt (Rizzoli, NY., 1989)

"An artistic truth is one of which the contrary is also true." – Oscar Wilde, quoted in Philippe Jullian, *Oscar Wilde*, Paladin, 1971; p337.

"The telling of beautiful untrue things, is the proper aim of Art." – Oscar Wilde, from *The Decay Of Lying*, quoted in Alvin Redman, ed., *The Wit And Humour Of Oscar Wilde*, Dover, 1959, p194.

"People say sometimes that Beauty is only superficial. That may be so. But at least it is not so superficial as Thought is." – Oscar Wilde, *The Picture Of Dorian Gray*, Wentworth Classics, p21

"The creation of something new is not accomplished by the intellect but by the play instinct acting from inner necessity. The creative mind plays with the objects it loves." – Carl Gustav Jung (*CW*, VI, para 197, cited in James Hillman, *The Myth Of Analysis*, ft 45, pg 48, Northwestern Uni. Press, 1972)

1. Our Species Name And Virtue:

In 1938 Johan Huizinga published a seminal book on the history and philosophy of play, entitled *Homo Ludens* – Man as player, the playful species.¹ Aristotle had called humanity *homo sapiens*. He claimed abstract reasoning distinguishes us from other animals; but also, in passing, said that we laugh at ourselves. So a case could be made for calling us *homo ridens* – the *laughing* species: the jokers.

Huizinga notes a case for calling us *homo faber*, the maker, the artistic species. However, he argues play underpins all other functions and this has not been sufficiently acknowledged in modernity. *Player* should be our name, says he: *homo ludens* (pg 17). Why the concern with human nature and species virtue? Harks back to Aristotle's idea that eudemonia arises from the excellent functioning of a species. If the human is the playful (then comic, rational, and artistic) animal – eudemonia will arise like the glow on a healthy apple if we act in a *virtuoso* way at being playfully comic, rational and artistic.

2. The Qualities Of Play.

A. The first quality Huizinga mentions is that play is an activity transcending pragmatic affairs (pg 19). It suspends ordinary self-interests for the noble virtue of play for itself. Play generates its own play world: play qualities trump worldly pragmatism. Even grudges can be suspended for the sake of a game. Play cannot be reduced to ordinary purposes (pg 25). Rather, *they* can be reduced to an innate play impulse (as we'll see).

If so, player happiness differs from the *micro-management* of happiness attempted in modern REBT or CBT psychotherapies. Rather than worldly pragmatism, play liberates us from worldly pragmatism: suspends even time and death. Just as we can say *art for art's sake*, we say *play for play's sake*, for both are aspects of an aesthetic sensibility that mocks the morally uptight pragmatic life as overcautious. In the attitude of play we are prepared to take risks, wagering on our luck – Lady Luck, as they say, win or lose. We let the luck of the game decide. Good sports graciously accept the results. It's what we call *sportsmanship*. *Fear none, respect all* – is the noble ethic of play.

B. Genuine play is an activity entered into voluntarily. A forced game is not play, e.g., the slave compelled against his will to play in gladiator games. Play quality is lost to worldly pragmatism then: to desperate work, forced labour. That's how Maximus saw it in the movie *Gladiator*. However, let's remember the spiritual ideal that underpinned the Roman games – essentially this: that we are all gladiators in life, because we too must fight to survive and put on a good show for the gods, our ultimate audience. We are all performers on display in a coliseum called the world. That's the basic Greco-Roman worldview, which moviemakers don't seem to understand.

If we adopted an ethic of playing for the gods we'd turn life into play, making suffering honourable as part of the game: a noble and redemptive performance. Plato wrote, "*Every man and woman should spend life in this way, playing the most beautiful games.*" (Plato, *Laws*, Book 7.803c): games vis-à-vis the gods or *transcendence* in some sense. Even if forced into gladiator games a slave might redeem his plight this way. By choice of attitude a beautiful game, a beautiful death. Otherwise we are all merely dying slaves, i.e., compelled into forced labour by life, not aesthetic performers. Modern culture ingrains this slave-like attitude in us, for it relegates play to rare times. Life itself is not beautiful games.

C. Play is not duty. It is something we could, in principle, choose to do or not do. It is at our leisure: to play or not play. Play is not imposed, e.g., on pain of damnation – a rather Christian

idea. Enforced morality is not play. Nor is play imperative or urgent. As Huizinga says, "*Play can be deferred or suspended at any time.*" (pg 26) and nothing of absolute concern lost. We only *prefer* to avoid delays, for to postpone a game is to defer aesthetic delight. And why, in all wisdom, would we want to do that?

Yet modernity *makes* us do that. Duty usurps play with an uptight utilitarianism or categorical imperative, both antithetical to play, both killjoys. Modernity is a killjoy culture we're chained in. Alternative? A voluntary play ethic: the 'fear none, respect all, and all results' badge of game honour. It means we don't look down on anyone's game, not even rivals we compete against, perhaps to the death. We can find play in everything.

D. Games are not serious, no matter how serious they seem during play. For game seriousness is provisional: part of play itself to enhance its quality for as long as the game lasts. When it's over we let it go, with its results. So the saying applies: *It doesn't matter if you win or lose it's how you play the game.* Cynics may reply, *If it doesn't matter, why a scoreboard?* But that's easy: a scoreboard gives feedback to enhance the quality of play while the game lasts. It too is provisional. It is still not essentially a matter of results but of play quality itself.

Play is not serious but for the fun of it, i.e., present joy in processes of play and aesthetic delight in the human art of brains, brawn, and beauty. Pragmatic factors, such as professional earnings, trophies, etc., are extraneous to the game, mere adjuncts. Insofar as they intrude into the game, they taint the non-seriousness of pure play. We don't have to eliminate them though, just see them as secondary.

E. Can the non-seriousness of play extend to all activities? In principle: yes. Just as gladiator games can be seen as theatre, an attitude of play could be adopted toward anything, e.g., even divorce, decline, disease, death, etc. Although we take provisionally serious action within the games for as long as they last, when we look toward the gods or transcendence, the game is seen as essentially non-serious.

It is not a matter of winning or perfection. Perfection is impossible, human hubris, for only gods could be perfect. No, it's a matter of playing to our personal best, which *is* possible. An ethic of *fear none respect all* naturally includes oneself. Therefore, we respect our game, our level, and limits of play. We give it our best shot with our handicap, e.g., as in golf. No one can expect more than our best at the time, not even the gods. And they don't appreciate any overreaching human hubris. They punish it. Icarus falls.

3. Now: A Reflexivity Riddle In Huizinga.

Huizinga's thesis is that "*civilisation arises and unfolds in and as play*" (pg 17). An innate play impulse drives the human creation of the 'symbolic orders' of life and society. Moreover, he says: "*the point is the playing.*" (pg 36) – not whatever biosocial functions are served as an adjunct. Play is more basic than rationality because reason derives from it, e.g., as in *language games*: right-brain feeding left-brain. Yet Huizinga fails to draw the logical conclusion: *all* communications are play. Perhaps he evades it because it implies his book is not what it claims to be, i.e., scientific truth, but only make-believe: i.e., a playful story about play. We play that we are players.

He wrote, "*Behind every abstract expression there lie the boldest of metaphors, and every metaphor is a play upon words. Thus in giving expression to life man creates a second, poetic world alongside the world of nature.*" (pg 23)

But this last bit is reflexively illicit: for the idea of a *first* world called "nature", and a division between first and second, *is also a play of language.* Thus: we know of no world other than one

meditated by metaphors, i.e., a *poetic* world. Neither Alice nor anyone else could break through a looking glass to a non-poetic world. And poetry, he readily admits, is play. The logical conclusion seems inescapable: we inhabit a surreal linguistic play world.

Moreover, he said that primitive rituals began as forms of play. By playful elaborations they evolved into our religions, philosophies, law, commerce, arts, sciences, and language itself. If life and thought is mediated by such language games then life, as we know it, is a creation of a pre-rational play impulse. If so, all appearances to the contrary, it is actually impossible to escape play.

For any attempt to think a world *outside* of play, or *advocate* non-play, is itself play – even, e.g., silence. “*All are rooted in the primeval soil of play*”, says he (pg 23).ⁱⁱ

Why then do we feel in modern times that we are not playing and there’s a big difference between rare times of play and the banal routines of life and work? The explanation lies in *the fluidity between the non-seriousness and the seriousness in play*. Players easily become disturbed by a game if they lose sight of it *as* play. It begins to seem fully serious: as real, fixed, given, final, absolute, i.e., as of *ultimate* concern. We may become like serious puritan types: uptight and rigid. But if everything *is* play then *the occlusion* of play *as* play is self-deception: a pattern of bad faith. One is existentially inauthentic.

Again the conclusion seems inescapable: *modern life is life in bad faith*. It denies that life is play. Moderns evade this, as even Huizinga does in a book extolling the virtues of play. We deny ourselves as players and deny ourselves play. Indeed, we are such great pretenders we are able to pretend to ourselves that we are not pretending! Such is the depth and constancy of our self-deception it colours every emotion: hence arises angst, depression, etc. We have deprived ourselves of the joys of play; but we could reverse this by adopting ourselves as players, re-enchanting the world with make-believe, and sustaining ‘the magical recourse’ of emotional life – not as truth, but as play. In make-believe, e.g., we can extend and enhance the quality of play by reconstituting human life as theatre vis-à-vis the gods, or some surreal transcendence.

4. The Deepest Riddle.

If modernity is right that life and reality is simply a *given*, is not *voluntary*, then it *cannot* be play: play is denied us. For we have not chosen the game of life. If so, we are not players but the playthings: for fate or circumstances, God or material forces, is playing us. We are pawns or puppets of external causes. But lets ask, Is there a form of make-believe in which we can view the totality of existence as play that *we ourselves* have created as players, i.e., where we are not the playthings or pawns in the game, or anything *less* than supreme – e.g., as an *uncaused* cause?

Yes there is. The fullest version of a complete *player philosophy* is the Hindu myth found in the Vedas: we are one Player Self dreaming up the world in its supremely powerful mind and playing the part of every dream avatar or persona within it. When playing me it dreams a world and temporal sequence around me. When playing you it creates this around you. As an “I”, an ego, we feel ourselves to be at the centre of highly important experiences in time relative to ourselves.

However, in this ontology, time and personas are merely simulations.

So vis-à-vis our *godhood* all is indeed play. The world is our construct, the Matrix: a virtual reality game we created. We perform our personas as avatars. We are on show. It’s an aesthetic spectacle, but not for *separate* gods. Rather, life is in and for our Self. We create and own it fully: for even if there were gods, they’d be Self in disguise, maybe in a more blissful form. If so, we are not “gladiator victims” in the coliseum of life “thrown” into existence, as Heidegger and other existentialists claimed. We are not here to struggle-unto-death at the mercy of separate gods or

God, or as pawns of physical causes. We are the supreme beings of value creating and playing the game of existence. *Call no man or god or thing master! How else could we be free?*

5. Why Player Philosophy Is The Best Psychotherapy.

If we are living in a depressing and fearsome world, an arena of losses, of sudden painful attacks, of suffering and pointless unavoidable deaths – horrible things happening around us – it would surely be irrational, or less than fully human or sane, if we did not frequently feel stressed, angry, panicky, lost, aggrieved – in short, anguished. *Anguish is appropriate in an anguishing world.* If so, existentialists were right to say it would be inauthentic, philosophically and psychologically dishonest, to pretend otherwise.

Inauthentic too, if modern psychotherapists tell us that we should not be feeling this way and there is something wrong with us if we do. For example, we are, they claim, clinically neurotic, clinically depressed, or we have this or that so-called borderline personality disorder, etc. The names are shifty, and often shift, but one way or another we get classified and labelled by the modern medical regime of discourse. This suits the psychotherapy establishment, for then they have us at their mercy. They have power and a marvellous way to relieve us of our money! And if we do not buy into their drugs or platitudes we will be called what? Irrational? We have cognitive distortions, irrational thoughts – equivalent to saying we are stupid.

Are modern psychotherapists inauthentic, burying their heads in the sand, wanting to bury our heads there too, by trying to make us feel relaxed and happy in our high-stress and unhappy modern world or culture? But surely a deep philosophical question of ontology must be raised first: What world *are* we living in? What *is* the world? What *is* real? How can we talk of emotional response without addressing ontology first? This is a topic going *deeper* than science or marketable middle-of-the-road counselling can take us.

It may be replied, “In that case, it is imponderable! You are being too philosophical. Nothing ontological can be proved.” But is that not the point? It is because nothing can be *proved* that we find room for *play* with ontology. If so, we don’t have to revert to a standard modern worldview based on dogmas – typically ones that have not been considered in a Socratic way, i.e., examined philosophically. If or when we do examine in a Socratic way it opens up room for play. It cannot be taken for granted any more that we are living in a depressing modern world of pointless suffering. For it is just as *probable* – there being no *non-questioning-begging* evidence either way – that we are living in a play world of our own making for our own good purpose as the one Player Self. We can, in short, *play it that way*: i.e., play it that we are players.

If so, a major revision of our *beliefs* is in order along Shakespearean lines. In such a revision none of things modern people consider an objection to life, e.g., pain, hardship, hazards, loss, illness, cancer, old age, death, etc., would really be bad or an evil or an objection. Rather, our attitude would be akin to the attitude a good sportsperson takes to a hazardous game or contact sport: the game may involve injury but injuries are worth it as the price of play. No pain, no gain, as they say. The good and bad, challenges, add spice to the aesthetics of the game.

Moreover, above all, it is not a game *foisted on us* as if slaves “thrown” into gladiator games against our will and compelled to put on a show for superiors. Such slaves would nobly rebel, as Maximus does: for who would be so base as be a slave or puppet in some other’s game – whether the other is, e.g., Greek gods, a Judaeo-Christian God, or a universe of physical causes? We cannot be free unless the game is ours. It can be ours fully: but if and only if we are the one Player Self who has created the whole cosmic game to play for our own purpose.

This may be the case even if, as this or that avatar, we have no idea what the purpose is. For this very forgetfulness may itself be essential to the play. After all, there can be no game without drawing boundaries. Hence, e.g., limits *of* and *as* time and space: voluntary restrictions on our supreme power and being. Hence also: avatar limits, handicaps, divisions, and oppositions.

Hence: rules, challenges, relative winning and losing. Hence: scoreboard results, causal consequences, factors of unforeseeable chance, probabilities not certainties, room for wagering on Lady Luck, etc. In short, we need a Quantum Theatre, not a predictable one operating like Newtonian clockwork. Indeed, player philosophy fits well with the universe as we experience it empirically. There is no conflict between it and science or mathematics.

So: did Huizinga himself arrive at this ultimate player story? Unfortunately no. He was stuck in the idea that play arises from an influx of mind or spirit into material biology. You may recognise this as mind-body Dualism: mind or spirit is somehow free, as in freewill, but it inhabits a body subject to physical causality. Mind-body Dualism is incoherent, self-contradictory. But that doesn't stop it being mainstream in our culture! In just shows how strong make-believe can be that, despite incoherence, people still think and emote in accordance with this tale – derived in the main from Christian storytelling – and take it for granted, even today.

As a mind-body Dualist, Huizinga lacked the philosophical tools to give a proper account of how we can be *homo ludens*. For this he would have needed Absolute Idealism, i.e., the make-believe that reality is all interlinked phenomena – a matrix, simulation model – in the mind of the one Player Self. For if the play impulse comes from a source other than our Self and our unconditioned supreme being, we would not be free to play but conditioned by external causes we have not chosen. There is still something – be it a separate God or gods or matter or biology or genes – that is *not* a construct of play but simply *the given*. So again we've been cast as gladiator slaves. If so, life is *not* play and we are *not* *homo ludens*. No wonder if, like Ivan Karamazov, or Maximus, or Albert Camus, or Dylan Thomas, we feel like rebelling – albeit it in a useless rage, e.g., raging against inevitable death.

The only way we can be *homo ludens* is if the game is not caused from outside ourselves but from inside ourselves, i.e., by our own unconditioned play nature expressing and imposing limits on itself. That is: if we are supremely powerful, but limit ourselves by a voluntary self-forgetting.

Maya! This is akin to what we do in a movie theatre. We permit ourselves to forget that the scenes are not illusionary. We perform this trick. Why? So we may feel the drama and emote accordingly. When Romeo and Juliet die we cry real tears although we know in the back of our mind they have not died at all. We invent a reality and pretend it is real for the effects. That is the basic formula for play. Our Player Self does this on a much grander scale.

Finally, how do we best deal with and defeat suffering in life? Viktor Frankl in *Man's Search For Meaning* showed the way: by being *willing* to suffer, creating it as meaningful, valuable. Willingness is the key. Willingness to suffer or even love a disability, hardship, or injury in life, as a good sportsperson willingly suffers injuries in a game, turns the situation around. If we are willing to suffer for our art, then we are happy to suffer. And if we are happy to suffer then, in a significant sense, we are no longer suffering. We celebrate the suffering and all the other moves and moments of the game, our art, even failures. The spirit of art can give us a hand up so we can view life itself as our art.

Modern psychotherapies don't go deep enough philosophically, ontologically. They recognise the pandemic of low self-esteem plaguing modern culture, realise it is the main source of our psychological problems, and claim to raise it. Yet they fail to teach the highest level of self-esteem

possible: the optimum we could have if we adopted the non-modern perspective that our Self and our avatar personas and all one and the same and divine. No one is anything less than supreme, having supreme value and being, even as they are, here and now. With this, we might bid goodbye to modern culture and re-enchant the world.

So my question to you is: *Is it possible to re-enchant the world as play and go a bit Wilde?*

Some Readings:

Huizinga, Johan, *Homo Ludens*, Paladin, 1971.

Oscar Wilde, *The Decay Of Lying: An Observation*, 1889. This can be found free on the web: just Google the title.

Anchor, Robert, *Johan Huizinga And His Critics*, in *History And Theory*, Vol 17, No 1, 1978, pp 63-93. This article can be found at: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2504901>

Ehrmann, Jacques (ed.), *Game, Play, Literature*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1968. Especially the entry by Eugene Fink pg 19ff.

Stevenson, William, *The Play Theory Of Mass Communication*, Transaction Books, 1988. Especially the chapter on Play Theory.

Hyers, Conrad M., *Zen And The Comic Spirit*, Longwood Academic, 1991.

Morreall, John, *Comic Relief: A Comprehensive Philosophy Of Humour*, John Wiley & Sons, 2009. This is available as an Electronic Resource, an eBook, via the RMIT Library.

The “Serious Play” Of Book 7 of Plato’s *Laws*, by David Roochnik, Boston University:
<http://people.bu.edu/aselpido/DR/documents/Book7Laws.pdf>

ⁱ See Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, Paladin Books, 1971. *Ludens* comes from the Latin *ludere*, and means *play*. From this we get English words such as the game *Ludo*, and the word *ludicrous*, which originally simply meant *playful* but has gradually come to suggest something more like absurd or ridiculous. Indeed, the word *ridiculous* comes from Latin *ridere*, which simply meant to *laugh*.

ⁱⁱ This need not come as a big surprise to us in light of postmodernism. For as we have seen, the major linguistic and postmodern philosophers have argued that language is best characterised as a game-like system of conventional rules, a story, that we play along with to communicate and as a constant source of imaginative, agonistic, and differential play forms. Nietzsche, anticipating them, had already described language as a “*mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, and anthropomorphisms...that have been enhanced, transposed and embellished poetically and rhetorically, and which after long use seem firm, canonical, and obligatory to a people: truths are illusions about which one has forgotten*”

that this is what they are." (See *The Portable Nietzsche*, edited by Walter Kaufmann, Penguin 1968, pg 46-47).
