

2 All the world's a stage

Childhood and the play of being

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Play may be considered as a particular kind of activity, distinct, say, from work. Or it may be considered as a fundamental element of human being; that is, as expressed in some way in *any* particular activity. While these two senses of play are obviously related, it is this latter sense that I wish to focus on here. Call it an 'ontological' examination of play as a mode of *ontos* or 'being'. Such an exploration is not historically new; indeed, it has a long history and, as we will see, has intensified over the past century particularly in phenomenological philosophy.

My own contribution is to explore the ontology of play in light of the play experiences of children. You would expect to be able to learn a great deal about play from the one-third of humanity who are under the age of eighteen. In fact, contemporary philosophies of play tend to be based narrowly (if without always acknowledging it) on the experiences only of adults. Using an approach that I call 'childism', which I will say more about below, I wish to look not at how conceptions of play may be applied to children, but instead at how the experiences of children may be applied to conceptions of play. If philosophy is on some level about questioning assumptions, then considering the often marginalized perspectives of the young should be one of its most important practices.

In what follows, I first outline what I mean by childism, then examine three broad ways in which childhood has had an impact on philosophies of play throughout Western history, and finally use postmodern resources to develop a more fully childist and hence more fully human understanding of play. My chapter title, 'All the world's a stage', comes from the melancholy Jacques in William Shakespeare's play *As You Like It*. It is a sigh of lament at life's meaninglessness (Shakespeare 1971: 266). Can the experiences of children suggest, on the contrary, that the play of existence is precisely what makes life meaningful?

Childism

First, then, 'childism'. By this I mean something analogous, though not identical, to recent forms of feminism, womanism, environmentalism, queer theory and so on (Wall 2010). Children are a historically disenfranchised group whose

experiences should both deconstruct and reconstruct inherited social norms. But since children's experiences are not the same as those of other groups, the methods and conclusions may be different.

Childism may be said to represent a 'third wave' of childhood studies, if I may borrow a feminist metaphor that is not in fact used in childhood studies itself. Just as 'first wave' feminism arose over a century ago with efforts by women to gain greater public voices, so also first wave childhood studies arose in the 1980s with efforts to study and include children's voices and agency. Of course, children have been objects of academic study as long as there has been scholarship, from the ancient Greek academy to twentieth-century developmental psychology. But the distinctive field that began to call itself 'childhood studies' (or sometimes 'the social sciences of childhood') – first among sociologists, anthropologists, and historians, and then across a wide range of disciplines – seeks to recognize children as not just pre-adults or adults-in-development, but as culturally diverse social actors in and of themselves. As Allison James and Alan Prout put it, 'children must be seen as actively involved in the construction of their own social lives, the lives of those around them and of the societies in which they live' (James and Prout 1997: 4). For example, a child soldier in Sierra Leone is not just a passive victim or someone arrested in development, but an agent who makes his or her own choices in the context of particular social and cultural constructs.

A second wave' of childhood studies may be identified with increasing efforts since the late 1990s to include children themselves as research and societal participants. Just as women made new inroads into work, culture, politics and academics starting in the 1960s, so also are children now beginning to be included as contributors towards scholarly research and conferences, children's parliaments, policy making, and other areas from which they were previously excluded (Percy-Smith and Thomas 2010). Children should not just be adult objects but also social and scholarly subjects. As Pia Haudrup Christensen puts it, childhood studies should adopt a 'dialogical approach' involving 'a shift toward engaging with children's own cultures of communication' (Christensen 2004: 174).

These 'waves' of childhood studies are significant achievements. However, as 'third wave' feminists began to recognize in the 1990s, when it comes to gender, even agency and participation face the limits of systematically structured oppression. The very playing field of a society – the very 'frame' of social understanding – has already been defined by historically dominant groups. While third wave feminism is multifaceted, thinkers such as Luce Irigaray, Judith Butler and Leslie Heywood make two important arguments for our purposes (Butler 1990; Heywood and Drake 1997; Irigaray 1993). First, there is no single normative femininity; instead it is globally, culturally, sexually, racially, religiously, and in many other ways diverse. Second, the goal of feminist research and activism is not merely to gain equality with men, but, more radically, to reconfigure historical power structures in response to issues of gender.

My view is that a similar third wave is needed when it comes to childhood. This I would call 'childism' proper. The goal here would be a political one: not

only to understand children's agency and to welcome children's voices and participation but, in addition, and more radically, to deconstruct the ways in which agency and participation across societies assume a basis in experiences of adulthood, and then to reconstruct their global meanings in response to the particular experiences of children. Philosophy would then engage in self-critique in terms of not only gender, culture and ethnicity, but also age.

The best example of how this approach is already under way is in the area of children's citizenship, where scholars are now asking what it might mean, for example, for a seven-year-old growing up in poverty in the South Bronx of New York City to be treated as a full citizen; and concluding that citizenship itself would have to be reimagined, not as an expression of independence or autonomy, but as one of interdependence and learning (Jans 2004; Lister 2008; Moosa-Mitha 2005). In my own work, I have argued for a new methodology for childhood studies that may be described as 'hermeneutical ellipse': an interpretive circle that never assumes a single centre of understanding, but is endlessly decentred in response to second centres of difference (Wall 2006).

Three philosophies of play

From this perspective, the philosophy of play turns out to have a lively if problematic history. One surprise is that Western philosophers have often learned a great deal from children. That is, arguments about human being, ethics, politics, aesthetics, epistemology and so on have sometimes been profoundly shaped by consideration of children's distinctive experiences. At the same time, these efforts to humanize children have also paradoxically led to various forms of children's dehumanization – and hence the dehumanization of humanity. I would like to suggest here that there are three basic ontologies of play that have persisted over Western philosophy (there are analogies in Eastern philosophies too, though I cannot examine them here), and that each has both its benefits and its drawbacks.

The top-down approach

One approach may be labelled 'top-down'. On this view, play describes human nature's childhood starting point as one of unruliness, passion and disorder. This original state of being requires rationality or divine law to be imposed upon it from above. Philosophical thinking and social practices exist to discipline and civilize humanity's original playfulness towards some higher order of being.

The most influential such thinker is Plato, who argues at length in *The Republic* and *Laws* that children are 'the craftiest, most mischievous, and unruliest of brutes', so that 'we should seek to use games [and play in general] as a means of directing children's tastes and inclinations toward the station they are themselves to fill when an adult'. Plato's famous censorship of the story-tellers is precisely because the play of imagination only encourages children and childlike adults to love changing appearances of truth instead of unchanging truth itself

(Plato 1961a: 1379, 1243; 1961b: 624). Another example is the fourth-century Christian theologian Augustine, who uses children's play to prove his central concept of 'original sin', games and amusements demonstrating pleasure in worldly creations rather than the true happiness of rest in the world's eternal Creator (Augustine 1961).

In a different way again, the Enlightenment philosopher Immanuel Kant argues that children's play exhibits humanity's fundamental subjection to desire and impulse, which may be overcome only by the self-discipline of learning to exercise autonomous reason. According to Kant's last published work, *Education*, children's 'very lively imagination ... does not need to be expanded or made more intense ... [but] needs rather to be curbed and brought under rule'; and 'playing with and caressing the child ... makes him self-willed and deceitful' (Kant 1960: 78, 50, 52–53). While such views may seem old-fashioned, they in fact remain very much alive today, both in popular movements for social discipline and order, and in philosophical arguments such as Alasdair MacIntyre's communitarian claim that children's love of games encourages individualism and needs to be redirected towards higher communal virtues (MacIntyre 1984: 188).

Such ontologies of play are both useful and problematic. What is useful is that children show that all human play involves real existential struggle: struggle with one's nature, passions, relations and very being. As in William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, children's play is not automatically good but potentially destructive and violent. What is problematic, however, is that such approaches obscure the senses in which play may be socially creative. They discourage experimenting with desires and imagination in ways that might open up new meaning and relations. There is even something self-contradictory in asserting that human being starts out utterly disordered but should be able to pursue order as its higher goal.

The bottom-up approach

An opposed historical understanding of play may be called 'bottom-up'. This approach views play as the expression of humanity's basic goodness and wisdom, its natural or sacred spontaneity and simplicity. Play is an expression of human authenticity and should be nurtured from the ground up as a way of resisting the corrupting habits of the world. Metaphors here tend to involve plants rather than animals: the tender shoots of inborn innocence needing to be cultivated to survive and grow strong in the world.

There are again many examples. The Jewish Bible's Genesis story of Creation may be interpreted to affirm humanity's original playful innocence prior to its fall. In the New Testament, Jesus tells his disciples that 'unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven' (Matthew 18:3; see similar sayings in Mark 9:37 and Luke 9:48). Several early church theologians argue that adults should 'imitate' the playfulness of children so that they can become, as Clement of Alexandria puts it, 'simple, and infants, and

guileless, ... and lovers of the horns of unicorns', and unconcerned with mere worldly ambitions (Browning and Bunge 2009: 104).

A similar view is also evident in the eighteenth-century Romantic philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, whose *Emile* and *Social Contract* depict children as 'noble savages' whose playfulness is the groundwork of morality and democratic liberty. 'Cultivate and water the young plant before it dies', Rousseau says; 'its fruits will one day be your delights'; and 'all of childhood is or ought to be only games and frolicsome play' (Rousseau 1979: 38, 125, 153). The founder of modern Protestantism, Friedrich Schleiermacher, claims that humanity's true 'gift' from God is its inborn playful openness and love (Schleiermacher 1959, 1990, 1991, 1999). Such a view also animates many of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century philosophers of play such as in Friedrich Fröbel (1891), Karl Groos (1912), Luther Gulick (1920), Johan Huizinga (1955) and Roger Caillois (2001). Huizinga, for example, argues in *Homo Ludens* ('playful humanity') that, as seen in children, 'the first main characteristic of play [is] that it is free, is in fact freedom' (Huizinga 1955: 8). Similarly, today's play theorist Stuart Brown claims that 'when we play right, all areas of our lives go better. When we ignore play, we start having problems. When someone doesn't keep an element of play in their life, their core being will not be light' (Brown 2009: 202).

Such ontologies of play have their strengths and drawbacks too. The main strength is that children's play is highly valued. Children's apparently fuller capacities for imagination, pretend, and invention are models of authentic human existence. They should be preserved in adult life and institutions. The drawback, however, is that play and childhood thereby risk being oversentimentalized: placed upon an ethereal pedestal where children's actual lives are stripped of human struggle and complexity. As other historical 'minorities' have discovered, being a model of purity also means being sequestered into a separate sphere where this purity can be guarded. It obscures the actual complexity of children's play experiences.

The developmental approach

Finally, a third possibility arising from history can be termed 'horizontal' or 'developmental'. The developmental view is that play is neither upward nor pure but rather a neutral instrument to be used for humanity's gradual improvement. Play is a means for individuals, societies, and history to make progress over time. Here the metaphors tend to consist, not of animals or plants, but of raw materials: blank pages, uncut jewels, lumps of wax, and the like that can be written upon or moulded.

Such a view is also far from new. Aristotle claims that children do not come into the world *ir-rational* but rather *pre-rational*, in a state of unformed natural potential. Children's play ought to be used for teaching them to find pleasure in virtuous rather than vicious habits (and in three successively more rational seven-year stages) (Aristotle 1947: 348 and 361; 1995: 294–96). A similar argument is made by the medieval Christian theologian Thomas Aquinas (1948:

II-II, Q. 10, a. 12, and III, Supplement, Q. 43, a. 2) and the medieval Jewish theologian Moses Maimonides (1904: chap. 54).

In modernity, John Locke argues in both *An Essay Concerning Understanding* and *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* that children start out life 'as white Paper, or Wax, to be moulded and fashioned as one pleases', so that 'all the Plays and Diversions of Children should be directed toward good and useful Habits, or else they will introduce ill ones' (Locke 1989: 265 and 192). Locke also argues that children's development is the basis of empirical science and democracy, since both rely on the human potential to play with new experiences over time. Today, developmental psychologists following Jean Piaget (1972) tend to understand children's play as important to becoming cognitively and morally adult. Brian Sutton-Smith interprets children's play in a similarly functional way as the basis of evolutionary development, in which play's function is to reinforce the organism's variability in the face of rigidifications of successful adaptation' (Sutton-Smith 1997: 231; see also Burghardt 2005, Cotter 2004, and Greenberg 2004).

The chief advantage of developmentalism, for our purposes, is that it connects childhood to adulthood along a shared play continuum. Children's play is neither to be overcome nor preserved but rather formed in new ways over time. The disadvantage, however, is that play is interpreted chiefly through the lens of the fully developed beings that children, by definition, *are not yet*. It is understood functionally as a means toward a future state of adulthood. This criticism is made by those in the field of childhood studies who view developmental psychology as having neglected children's own agency. More generally, play is not just a means to an end but a meaningful activity in and of itself.

Play as creativity

This historical typology is obviously too simple. It merely identifies persistent tendencies that continue to shape understanding today, even if they can also be combined in various ways. But it does demonstrate that efforts to include children's play in philosophy can be deeply paradoxical. The question posed to us by this history is whether we can learn from children's play without in the process obscuring childhood itself. Can we at least press these various insights toward new understandings of a deeper play reality? While I cannot presume to overcome my own adultism either, I do believe that play can be understood in a broader and more complexly childist way.

An example

I would like to start with a somewhat counter-intuitive example, one that may not seem like children's play but in fact helps us imagine more of play's ontological complexity. If play is an element of human being *per se*, then it should be found throughout the range of human activities and in many different forms. The following is merely one telling illustration.

Ying Fry was born in Hunan province in China and adopted by a middle class family in the United States. She is one of millions of infant girls who were abandoned by their birth families because of China's one-child policy, designed to spur economic growth. It was likely a painful decision for her birth mother to leave her newborn outside a police station, and it was undoubtedly difficult for Fry herself to lose the only relationships she knew. The smells, sounds, and relationships into which she was born suddenly disappeared and were replaced by the new environment of a large government-run orphanage.

Fry herself tells this story of her infancy when she is eight years old in her book for children and adults titled *Kids Like Me in China*, which she wrote shortly after revisiting her old orphanage with her adoptive parents. While Fry does not directly remember her infancy, she describes what it must have been like in powerful ways: 'To get people to have small families, the [Chinese] government made some rules, and they're really strict about them. But the babies didn't do anything wrong! Why do they have to lose their first families? I don't think those rules are fair to babies' (Fry 2001: 2–3).

As both a newborn and an eight-year old, Fry must constantly 'play' with her own experiences and meaning in the world. As her infancy shows, she is shaped by untold layers of relationships, communities, politics, and histories. She is partly who she is because of her birth parents, her biological ancestors, the Chinese government, global economic systems, international adoption agencies, her adoptive parents in the United States, their own ancestors, their larger cultures and societies, and so on beyond any conclusive reckoning. At the same time, however, none of these conditions merely shape Fry passively. She also actively creates senses of meaning out of them for herself. As both a baby and an eight-year-old, she invests her complex and powerful surroundings with her own responses, ideas, and aspirations. She is both 'played by' and 'plays with' her worlds of meaning. She exists, in short, within an endless hermeneutical ellipse: a world that shapes the meaning of her experiences even as she in turn reshapes this meaning in new ways for herself.

This ontological experience that starts in childhood is not particularly well explained by history. Fry is certainly in part the plaything of unruly nature, but this does not mean that she cannot also play with her natural desires and feelings on her own terms. Likewise, while she clearly does play in the sense of acting freely and spontaneously, this does not mean she is so somehow wholly pure or separate from the world, or relieved of painful struggle and imposing contexts. And while it can be said that she uses play to develop toward healthy adulthood, *to her* play is not just a means but also an end in itself. It is how she constructs meaning in each new experienced present. On any of the three traditional views, Fry's experiences of play are misunderstood.

Phenomenological underpinnings

A more complex sense of play can begin to be fleshed out using insights from postmodern phenomenology. There are two reasons for this. First, while

phenomenological philosophers rarely in fact say anything about children, they do have new things to say about human being as 'play'. And second, what is new here is an effort to describe play in terms of concrete phenomena or *experiences*. Phenomenologists reject the Cartesian dualism underpinning modernity in which human being is divided into subjectivity and objectivity, inner reason and outer nature. They argue instead that human being is 'being-in-the-world': the experience of interactively belonging to relations, societies, and cultures. In other words, human being can be described as an experience of play in the world.

Interestingly, the three most influential phenomenologies of play mirror the three perspectives described above from history, even as they bend them in more interactive directions. Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer, for example, turn a basically top-down view of play into a description of human being's dynamic belonging to history. For Heidegger, play is 'the historical movement of Being,' the way that 'Being "roys with" man. The role of man [sic] is to "play along with" the play ... and man is caught up in that play' (Heidegger 1957: 206, quoted in Caputo 1970: 34). Or as Gadamer puts it, play is the movement of 'historical consciousness' that, in a somewhat 'tragic' way, is less 'something a person does' than something that 'absorbs the player into itself' (Gadamer 1989: 104–105 and 110). In contrast, Jacques Derrida argues for a more bottom-up ontology of play in which historical being is subjected to constant deconstruction or undoing. According to Derrida's more comic view, human being finds meaning only in 'the play of differences,' the presence of absences, the mischievous and disruptive 'movement of play that "produces" ... differences' of meaning in the first place (Derrida 1996: 441, 449, and 459). Finally, something akin to a developmental perspective (though this is a bit more of a stretch) is found in Richard Kearney's suggestion that play is the endless 'imagination of life's unfolding "possibilities"' (Kearney 2002). 'To be human is to play with continually new possibilities for meaning and thereby constructing over time a narrative identity woven from [one's] own histories and those of others' (Kearney 2003: 188).

While useful, what is strange about these philosophies of play is that, unlike throughout history, they entirely ignore the play of children. Against their own call for attention to differences of experience, they assume the rather narrow play perspective of adulthood. As the example of Fry suggests, each only touches on part of the proverbial elephant. She 'plays' with her world of meaning by all at once *being played by* her historical conditions, *playing with* their endless deconstruction, and *playing out* her own emerging narrative possibilities.

A revised phenomenology of play – revised along childist lines – would describe human being as playful in a more fully elliptical sense. To play is endlessly to recreate over time one's already created worlds of meaning. It is to participate, from birth to death, in the great ongoing drama of humanity's recreation of the meaning of its existence. If play is to include children, it must be understood as the capacity for decentering or stretching out one's historically given horizons of meaning according to one's own changing and particular lived

experiences. As the chorus in Sophocles' *Antigone* declares: 'Many are the wonders, none is more wonderful than man... He faces nothing that is to come without contrivance' (Sophocles 1991: lines 369–374). From humble acts of eating and conversation to powerful works of art and science, humanity plays with the meaning of its own being by constantly deconstructing and reconstructing it anew. This poetics of play or world-creativity is what it means to be human.

The play of philosophy

If play is this ontological capacity for world-creativity, then it has a range of implications for scholarship and policy. I would like here to briefly sketch three implications specifically for the field of philosophy.

First, play is not only a legitimate object of philosophical study, but also a way of describing what it means to think philosophically in the first place. Play is not unlike other experiences such as anxiety and love: it has particular characteristic expressions but also deeper ontological significance. The word 'play' in English already points in this direction, referring either to specific activities such as recreation, music, and theatre, or to a quality of experience itself such as expressiveness, spontaneity and engagement (the word's Germanic root *plegan* suggests self-engagement or risk). While philosophers are not normally thought of as either childlike or playful, in fact the practice of philosophizing comes down to reconstructing deep historical constructs of meaning. It is innovative in the profoundest sense. Philosophy is not just a professional occupation but also an activity of being human. And from this point of view, it is practiced by all human beings from birth to death. To think philosophically is to 'play with' the most basic meaning of being human.

Second, philosophy thereby finds an opening into questions of cultural diversity. Some argue that play is so culturally and historically specific as to defy generalization (Chudacoff 2007: xiii; Gençü 1999: 4; and Lancy 2007). Others claim in contrast that play lies at the very root of cultural expression itself (most famously Huizinga's assertion that play is the agonistic force behind the formation of civilizations) (Huizinga 1955: 4, 8, 10, 13, 75, 156, 173; see also Malaby 2009: 211). I would argue that both perspectives are right. Each is an expression of the more ontologically basic capacity to play with meaning. For children and adults alike, the ability to innovate and imagine new worlds is the grounds for the possibility of both culture as such and cultures' endless diversities. Culture is both universal and irreducibly differentiated because it represents human being as play.

Finally, the philosophy of play, so understood, has significance not only for ontology but also for ethics and politics. As I and others have argued, children are full moral beings who exercise empathy, seek justice and take responsibility for others around them (Bluebond-Langner 1996; Gordon-Smith 2009; Matthews 1994; Thorne 1993; Wall 2010). A childist account of play can help in formulating a more dynamic and child-inclusive ethics. From birth to death, the

most fundamental obligation of human beings is to play amidst differences of experience in order to create more broadly expansive human relations. If human being is play, then being ethical is not reducible to merely accepting a higher order, expressing inner freedoms, or progressing in social rationality. It means responding ever more creatively over time to humanity's endless differences of experience. It means playing with relations to one another by reconstructing historical assumptions, imagining one another's different experiences, and endlessly striving to create more diversely inclusive worlds. While the Convention on the Rights of the Child affirms children's right to play (in Article 31), in a broader sense it is everyone's human right to play a part in the formation of their societies (Wall 2010: 113–138).

Conclusion

Whatever its particular consequences, the philosophy of play makes a vital contribution to understanding human being. Central to this contribution is its ability to deconstruct philosophy's historically limited adultist horizons and reconstruct them through childist critique. Not only has play functioned as an important lens through which philosophers have thought about human nature, but it has much still to learn from the complex play experiences of those who are newest to the world. Philosophy should play with these historically suppressed experiences. What it will learn is that play is not just an irrational, spontaneous or useful activity, but rather the grounds for the human possibility for meaning. If all the world is play, this does not mean that therefore life is pointless. On the contrary, it means that life is open to meaning's creation. Philosophy is not only about play. Philosophy is play.

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