

# FREEDOM: THE SERENITY OF LETTING GO

• Jörg Splett •

“Freedom has to be able to let go—of oneself and of others. Otherwise it cannot be free. Could it be, though, that, in the end, the only reason why freedom exists as such is to let go (of itself)?”

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*“It’s when he is most light-hearted  
that he is most sublimely serious in the only real sense.”*  
—Hegel

*“This is the point: to let yourself be played with.”*

## 1. *A society for children?*

1. The aestheticization of life, even of ethics and religion, seems to be the signature of the *zeitgeist*. It is not only the critics of contemporary culture who think so. The spokesmen of the *zeitgeist* itself explicitly avow their intentions. They openly proclaim that the “grand narratives,” with their claim to think and will the absolute, are too serious, too demanding, for man and that they drive him to treat his fellow men inhumanely. You have to take the world and life as a game,<sup>1</sup> as an “adventure vacation,” if you do not want to make yourself sick.

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<sup>1</sup>[In what follows, the words “game” and “play” both consistently translate the same word, “*Spiel*,” which can have both meanings—Tr.]

Play is the world of children. Robert Bly certainly thinks so when he says that our society is characterized by its “refusal to grow up.” It is a “society for children.”<sup>2</sup> One of this society’s godfathers, Friedrich Nietzsche, explicitly presents the child as the ideal goal at the beginning of his *Zarathustra*.<sup>3</sup>

The spirit, Nietzsche says, passes through three different forms. The first form, represented by the camel, the load-bearing animal who is strong enough to shoulder the burden even of the heaviest “thou shalt,” stands for reverence, a sense of duty, and renunciation. By accepting this burden, the camel turns itself into the lion, which counters the “thou shalt” with its “I will,” pronouncing “a sacred No even to duty.” And yet, being a lion is a strenuous effort that itself needs to be overcome through the transformation into the child. “The child is innocence and forgetting, a new beginning, a game, a wheel that rolls itself, a first movement, a holy affirmation.” Duty and will have given way to a pure “I am.” Or, since the child is totally un-self-regarding, maybe it would be even more accurate to say that he is just *there*.

2. In order to understand what this means, we would do well to cast a glance back to the thinker whose shadow rises up behind the few lines we have quoted from Nietzsche. That thinker is Heraclitus. Fragment 79 famously reads: “Time is a child that plays at draughts, the dominion of a child.” Now, the issue here is not the correct interpretation of Heraclitus himself, but Nietzsche’s account of the fragment.<sup>4</sup> For Nietzsche, its point is that the world is “fire . . . playing with itself,” a “coming-to-be and passing-away, a building and tearing down, without any moral tit-for-tat, in an eternally identical innocence . . . playing like the artist and the child.”<sup>5</sup> “It is not wantonness, but the desire for play that, reawakening, calls new worlds to life. The child throws his toy aside, but soon starts again, in innocent caprice” (831).

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<sup>2</sup>R. Bly, *Die kindliche Gesellschaft* (Munich, 1997).

<sup>3</sup>F. Nietzsche, *Sämtliche Werke (=SW)* (Colli/Montanari), KSA IV, 28–31.

<sup>4</sup>Nietzsche is followed by M. Heidegger, *Der Satz vom Grund* (Pfullingen, 1957), 188; id., *Nietzsche, I* (Pfullingen, 1961), 333f., as well as by E. Fink, *Spiel als Weltsymbol* (Stuttgart, 1960), 28. For a study of Heraclitus himself, see K. Held, *Heraklit, Parmenides und der Anfang von Philosophie und Wissenschaft* (Berlin, 1988), 438–440.

<sup>5</sup>*Die Philosophie im tragischen Zeitalter der Griechen*: KSA I, 828 and 830.

In good philosophical fashion, we suddenly find ourselves transported from concrete phenomena to “God and the world” as a whole. Of course, we must not lose sight of the concrete in all of this. Nevertheless, we also have to hold onto its symbolic meaning. In other words, we are interested *both* in the child “as such,” *and*, at the same time, in how the child as such gives us the key to understanding the self, the world, and God.<sup>6</sup>

Speaking of which, it is time to point out a remarkable omission in Nietzsche’s view of the child and of being a child. This omission then has consequences for how he views the world as a whole (or is it rather the other way around?). In his account, in fact, the wheel sets *itself* rolling. The child’s openness is a matter of capriciously wanting now this game or toy, now that one. But are toys really the original object of the child’s relation to the world? Isn’t it actually his mother?<sup>7</sup>

The first and fundamental chapter in one of the finest books on the subject, Heinrich Spaemann’s *Orientierung am Kinde*, bears the title “Looking Up.”<sup>8</sup> “The most child-like thing about the child is the direction he looks in.” “The chalice of his existence opens upwards”

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<sup>6</sup>That, after all, is what someone like Goethe means when he speaks of the “symbol”: “By perfectly exhibiting itself, it points to everything else” (to K. E. Schubarth, 2 April 1818).

<sup>7</sup>Without prejudice to the fact that this “dyad” has to open up, not only to the rest of the family, but also to relation with objects. For a helpful conspectus, see C. J. Stone and J. Church, *Kindheit und Jugend. Einführung in die Entwicklungspsychologie*, 2 vols. (Munich, 1978).

A further question regarding play itself would be this. How does the sort of capriciousness Nietzsche has in mind affect the seriousness without which play would be mere “playing around”? (F. W. A. Fröbel, *Die Menschenerziehung* [Leipzig], 75: “Man’s purest, most spiritually elevated production on this level [is] . . . not mere playing around.”) This seriousness has to do with *rules*. This is most obvious when people play together (Nietzsche makes as little room for playmates as he does for a mother). But it can also be seen when people play alone. See J. Château, *Das Spiel des Kindes. Natur und Disziplin des Spielens nach dem dritten Lebensjahr* (Paderborn, 379): “Man can raise himself up only by submitting himself to a rule. Man has an inkling of this truth from his childhood onwards—whether it is the childhood of the individual or of the species. It is the fundamental principle distinguishing human play [from animal play]. By the same token, play contains the deepest source of the moral sense.”

<sup>8</sup>H. Spaemann, *Orientierung am Kinde. Meditationsskizzen zu Mt 18:3*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Einsiedeln, 1983).

(23). The child is not a wheel, but a bowl. Instead of merely picking *something* up, playfully destroying it,<sup>9</sup> and then throwing it away again, the child looks expectantly towards *someone*. “And because the child is oriented completely upwards . . . he is all eye” (30).

This puts the image of the child in a wholly different light. And only this light explains why Jesus presented the child as the norm his disciples were to look to.

Does it follow, then, that we should also see play differently from the way Heraclitus and Nietzsche see it? The issue before us, in other words, has to do with the *seriousness* of true play.<sup>10</sup>

## 2. *Playing versus playing around*

1. It is no fun to play checkers with somebody who gets deeply offended every time he loses a piece, as if each loss were a personal affront. But it is not much better to play with somebody who does not care about his pieces or what happens to them. He is “doing you the favor” of playing, but he is not really involved in the game; the whole time, his mind is somewhere else. There are two ways to spoil a game: by confusing it with reality and taking it too seriously, or by not taking it seriously enough because you think playing is the same thing as just playing around.

Bear in mind that our reflections are aimed precisely at adults, and not at children, whose games have been called their form of work. Everyone knows that children—at least insofar as they are

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<sup>9</sup>G. W. F. Hegel, *Sämtliche Werke* (=SW) (Glockner), X, 101 (addendum to no. 396 of the *Encyclopedia*): “The most reasonable thing children can do with their toys, however, is break them.” Rather than comment on this claim, I would like merely to point to the contrary phenomenon: A. Ziegler, “Der Mensch schafft sich an der Schöpfung zu Tode. Theologische Hinweise zum Schöpferischen und Zerstörerischen im Menschen,” in *Engadiner Kollegium (1983). Schöpfung und Zerstörung* (Schaffhausen, 1984): “We can only hold things in honor, not in existence. But the child knows how to hold its favorite toys in honor even when they are almost totally destroyed” (214). The statement occurs *en passant* in Hegel’s essay on the essence of philosophical criticism (I, 186).

<sup>10</sup>J. Splett, *Spiel-Ernst* (Frankfurt, 1993). The discussion of the child is borrowed from chapter seven of my book *Freiheits-Erfahrung. Vergegenwärtigungen christlicher Anthropo-Theologie*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Cologne, 2006). Similarly, the present essay in its entirety is intended to present the thesis of my book *Spiel-Ernst*, which is that play is serious business.

still unaffected by the “loss of childhood”—take playing seriously.<sup>11</sup> And for the same reason it is tempting not to take children and the years of play seriously enough (because they are years of *play*).

In any case, while the healthy child may be serious about playing, he does not confuse play and reality at all. The chair *is* in fact a car or a train here and now, but at the same time its nature “in itself” as a chair remains unchanged—even for the child.

This state of affairs defines the basis of all play. For this reason, we have to get clear about the peculiar “is” involved in the equipment, rules, and order of play if we want to understand its specific kind of seriousness. Because play has to do with an “is”—in contrast to the, in the long run, “intolerable lightness” (precisely not “of being” [Milan Kundera], which would of course be intolerable if it were the case, but) of merely dreamed-about possibilities, of a fantasist’s “as if.”

The world has a density, a “gravity,” which the “I” absolutely needs as a counter-weight to prop it up and keep it from losing itself. Now, the first manifestation of this density and gravity is the fact that during play the players have to respect the rules that define the game they have chosen.

Admittedly, this simple, general principle applies to an astonishing range of possible variations. *Objectively*, on the side of the rules, the arc stretches from minute regulations covering even the smallest possible eventualities to rules so open-ended that they can suddenly change in the middle of the game. And yet, even this modification has to happen in the context of one and the same game, assuming, of course, that the change is not intended to interrupt play and start a new game instead. Something similar is true of the *subjective* side, which has to do with following the rules. Rule-following ranges from punctilious correctness to calculated violation of the rules—so long as the players are also prepared to accept the prescribed penalties, rather than quit playing altogether.

2. The seriousness of play goes deeper than this internal acceptance of the rules, though. When you think about it, abiding

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<sup>11</sup>Château (see note 7) writes: “Just as the adult proves his worth through work, the child confirms his personality through play. . . . If we look at childlike play in its deeper essence, then, we see that it is an act of childhood.” See N. Postman, *Das Verschwinden der Kindheit* (Frankfurt, 1983); *Wir amüsieren uns zum Tode* (Frankfurt, 1985).

by the rules is only an embodiment of the principle of non-contradiction: If someone wants to play chess—and not, for example, simply play with a chess piece like the Queen—then he has to play chess according to the established rules of the game. But what about the act of acceptance itself, which is to say, a person’s decision to enter into a game in the first place?

I would like to illustrate this with an example from literature. After all, it is not just what is shown on stage that is a play, but also the act of reading, regardless of whether you are reading poetry, short stories, or a novel. (Of course, there are plenty of voices claiming that reading lacks the required “seriousness” about life, though they may be willing to make an exception for its therapeutic value. This is particularly true with regard to fairy tales.) My example is Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s saying about the “willing suspension of disbelief”—Coleridge’s definition of what he calls “poetic faith.”<sup>12</sup>

Tolkien is undoubtedly right when he sees Coleridge’s maxim as actually expressing the attitude of someone who does not really get involved in the game. “If you are obliged, by kindness or circumstance, to stay, then disbelief must be suspended (or stifled), otherwise listening and looking would become intolerable.”<sup>13</sup> The person who gets seriously involved in a fairy tale, or a stage play, or a round of solitaire, or a parlor game does not suspend his disbelief—in other words, his knowledge that the story is not a real history, or that the cards are not a prediction of his future. Rather, he enters into a secondary world precisely as a believer—in other words, as someone who acknowledges its rules.

### 3. *Play as world-building*

1. Actually, he does something more, something decisive. He does not just enter into this world after it has already been constructed, but rather collaborates in setting it up. Playing means constructing a form. Looked at from the outside, this form is a bit of time and space within our everyday world, a preserve where things

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<sup>12</sup>*Biographia Literaria*, II, 16 (cited here from M. H. Abrams, *Spiel und Lampe. Romantische Theorie und die Tradition der Kritik* [Munich, 1978], 406).

<sup>13</sup>*On Fairy Stories*, in *The Tolkien Reader*, 12<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York: Ballantine, 1971), 37.

are less serious. But anyone who has eyes to see recognizes this form as a world of its own. Seen in this way, it is no longer inside of or next to the ordinary world; it is not a kind of “back world” behind this one. Rather, it arises from the transformation of this world; we will consider how this happens later. (And transforming something does not actually require doing anything to it; nothing has to “happen” to the chair to turn it into a bus.)

A world of its own. This explains why play has no objective outside itself (despite all its potential benefits for man), why it transcends functionality, and why it makes sense on its own terms as a law unto itself. Because “wherefores” exist only within the horizon of a world, but do not apply to the horizon or to the world itself. In this sense, every player is a creator. This is true even if he just repeats someone else’s creation—just as someone looking at a painting, while he is of course less creative than the artist, could not perceive the work of art as such, or grasp its meaning, if he did not have an image-making power of his own (“imagination”).

But if play is a creative act, and man at play is a *homo creator*,<sup>14</sup> then play turns out to be a special form of what Schiller called the appearance, meaning the self-revelation, of freedom. Language already clues us in to this fact. A machine part that is “in play” is one that does not jam or get stuck, but is able to move “back and forth.” (And though the etymology of the word “play”—at least the German equivalent “Spiel”—remains unexplained, some have conjectured that the idea of “back and forth” is one of its basic meanings; the “player,” in the sense of “minstrel,” was originally a juggler.<sup>15</sup>)

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<sup>14</sup>D. L. Sayers, *The Mind of the Maker* (London: Methuen, 1941), German translation, *Homo Creator. Eine trinitarische Exegese des künstlerischen Schaffens* (Düsseldorf, 1953). Schiller uses play to formulate a humanistic, instead of theological, definition of what makes man human in his 15<sup>th</sup> letter on education: “Man plays only when he is man in the full sense of the word, and *he is fully man only when he plays*” (*Werke* [Fricke/Göpfert], 5<sup>th</sup> ed. [Munich, 1975], V, 618; emphasis in the original).

<sup>15</sup>The reader will have noticed that I have not defined play. Here is how Wittgenstein suggests we deal with the issue of what play is: “For example, take a look at the transactions we call ‘games’. . . . What do they all have in common? Do not say: ‘There *has to be* something common to them, otherwise we would not call them “games.”’ Look instead. . . . We see a complicated network of similarities that overlap and criss-cross. . . . The best name I can come up with for these similarities is ‘family resemblances’” (*Philosophische Untersuchungen*, nos. 66–67).

2. The notion of freedom brings us to the essential reason why play is serious. Schiller's idea that man at play is wholly man (and vice versa) turns out to be anything but merely "poetic." It is actually pregnant with meaning. Man becomes whole when he plays. Why? Because he is wholly given over to, and gathered up in, the game—provided he plays in truth, rather than being distracted, dispersed, and divided in mind.

And in being collected, even "bound," in this way, man is wholly himself, because he has not only freely let himself be bound, but also—however paradoxical this sounds—freely remains so. Of course, he can cast off the spell, provided that he does not confuse the game with reality and so become enslaved by it. This is the truth in Coleridge's phrase about the willing suspension of disbelief. In other words, man is wholly human when he plays because in play he "realizes" (both in the sense of discovers and actualizes) and witnesses to himself as a free being. And that is the point: man's status as a free being is what defines him as human. (The tradition defines him rather in terms of speech or reason, but this includes freedom; I have opted here to approach things in the opposite direction, and to present reason and language as aspects of freedom.)

Schiller obviously means the opposite of playing around (in all its forms: from the child's unthinking caprices to the calculating games of "playboys" and "playmates"). But we have to avoid overloading play, too; we do not want to make some kind of pedagogical ideology out of it. That would deprive both play and humanity of their identity. Man is whole and wholly human—but not only, and not even primarily, in play. He also can and should attain (and keep attaining) this wholeness in work, love, struggle, confession, repentance, prayer, and even death. Play is not the highest form of the human, just one of its highest forms.

That said, play *does* hold a special position among these forms. For man can bring "play" into all his other basic acts and situations. He can, of course, playact these things unseriously, or even engage in deceitful make-believe. But he can also play at them seriously, for example, in political, social, and religious celebration. "We play at seriousness, we play at authenticity, we play at reality, we play at work and conflict, love and death. And we even play at play."<sup>16</sup> There is a specific way in which "play encompasses and

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<sup>16</sup>E. Fink, *Oase des Glücks. Gedanken zu einer Ontologie des Spiels* (Freiburg, 1957), 25.

comprehends” all other phenomena and domains of life, “giving them a presence in the curious element of the imaginary and so enabling human existence to show itself in its pure quintessence.”<sup>17</sup>

And thanks to the freedom of this “presentation,” its removal from the chain of inevitable consequences that attend the living out of everyday life, the essence of basic human acts can radiantly appear “in the curious mirror of seeming” (ibid.) with an undisguised clarity that is rare in the ongoing process of living. Lovemaking in the tango, death on the stage, battle in the epic or the game—none of these is “deadly” serious. And you spoil the whole thing when you mix up “appearance” and “reality,” or, even worse, mistake one for the other. Recent history offers us quite a few examples of such mostly well-intentioned, but abortive, attempts to tear down the boundary between performance and life. Since they inevitably lead to the moralization of art—or, as the case may be, to the aestheticization of morality and politics—they can only finally destroy the attempt to be a responsible human being.<sup>18</sup>

#### 4. *The world of play is symbolic*

1. On the other hand, appearance, recognized as such, is the opposite of illusion. It is not a mere seeming, but the radiant manifestation of something in its truth—or of the truth of something.<sup>19</sup> In a word: the play-world is a symbolic one.

A symbol, though, in the full sense I am proposing here (symbol as a “real symbol”) is always more than what is called a “mere symbol.” It does not mean a replacement or a substitution or a mere reference as is typical of a sign. Nor does it mean a reinterpretation of “data” that simply bypasses the economy of the sign. Rather, it is the real and effective presence of someone or something in his or its very being.<sup>20</sup> Of course, this presence is of a special kind, because the person or thing that is present shows up “in another.”

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<sup>17</sup>E. Fink, *Grundphänomene des menschlichen Daseins* (Freiburg, 1979), 401f.

<sup>18</sup>See W. Benjamin’s familiar definition of fascism: *Gesammelte Schriften* (Frankfurt, 1980), I, 2, 508.

<sup>19</sup>I would like to propose this as a definition of beauty.

<sup>20</sup>See “Symbol,” in *Sacramentum Mundi*, IV, 784–789.

The invisible is in the visible, the thought is in the audible word, the intended meaning is in the speech or the action. The point, then, is that what we call “facts” are multi-dimensional, which means that we have to look at them creatively if we want to perceive them.

Perhaps the densest expression of this situation is a couplet by the Italian poet Giuseppe Ungaretti, which goes like this: “Tra un fiore colto e l’altro donato / l’inesprimibile nulla” (One flower is plucked, another is given. In between: / that ineffable nothing).<sup>21</sup> Ungaretti means the same “nothing” that stands between the chair and the “car,” or between the board and the chessboard, or between the block of wood and the knight. But also between the flesh and bones and the body we know as a person (the eyeball and the “sun-like eye”), the sound and the word, the contact of two mouths and the kiss.

In play, then, one thing stands for another. More precisely, the person who plays freely stipulates, or takes, one thing for another. This other can be everyday objects, himself and his fellow players, or can even include the entire world that we all share.

2. Even here freedom is not without its limits. It is not the case that anything can symbolize anything else. The Bible, for example, uses the lion as a figure of both God and the devil, but not of shrewdness (the serpent) or innocence (the dove). It was for this reason that Hegel put the symbol in second place after the sign or token. For when it “betokens,” Hegel wrote, “the intelligence decides and rules over the use of sensory images more freely than it can when it symbolizes.”<sup>22</sup>

As Hegel goes on to explain, the symbol, being a sensory embodiment of something intellectual, is by its very nature inadequate to its meaning and, for this reason, ambiguous. In other words, since it has a form of its own, which distinguishes it from what it symbolizes, it permanently conceals what is symbolized while also revealing it. You can choose between the form and the meaning; you can willfully insist on the symbol’s sense as a thing in itself or you can grasp its properly symbolic reference.

Unlike the depth of the symbol—which sometimes has nothing behind it—thought “is actually just that: self-manifesta-

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<sup>21</sup>“Eterno,” in *Vita d’un uomo*, 7th ed. (Milan, 1974), 5.

<sup>22</sup>*Enzyklopädie* (1830), no. 458, note (*SW*, X, 345).

tion—its nature, it itself, is this: being clear.”<sup>23</sup> It should be noted, though, that, for Hegel, this clarity has to be clarity for reason, but not necessarily for the understanding.

And yet, there is a counter-argument: even thought has to *manifest* itself. This shows that thought is itself only when it self-emptyingly goes out of itself. And this event, in its many “forms” ranging from myth to philosophical discourse, can justly be called “symbolic.”<sup>24</sup> For symbol—*symballein*—means throwing or binding together one thing and another to form an identical unity. According to Hegel, this “symbolization” is ultimately grounded and fulfilled in thinking and knowing. In reality, it occurs, event-like, in an even more original context: the practical self-enactment of (a knowing) *freedom*.

If we understand symbol in this sense, then we can agree with Ricoeur (who otherwise does not champion the sort of universalization of the notion of symbol we are arguing for here) that the symbol is not a relation of sense (or reference) to thing, but a relation of sense to sense.<sup>25</sup> The symbol itself is not first a thing (*symbole symbolisé*), but a performance (*symbole symbolisant*), or, in the terms we have been using here: play.

Symbol, then, is not an outward sign, but the appearing of a reality. To be sure, this reality is outside of itself, emptied out, present in another. But, in being all that, it is as it were actively turning itself inside out, hence, actuating itself. By the same token, it itself is present in the other into which it is emptied out. Symbol, understood in the sense of “real symbol,” is not about one thing referring to another, even if we suppose the symbolic image to be “eloquent,” or full, or “symbolic” to a high degree. Symbol is an active self-expression and, as such, a self-enactment. In this self-enactment, freedom actively realizes itself in a new fullness.

It follows that symbol is precisely not merely a half whose other half is missing or invisible, as is often claimed.<sup>26</sup> On the

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<sup>23</sup>*Geschichte der Philosophie*, SW, XVII, 122.

<sup>24</sup>E. Cassirer, *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (Darmstadt, 1964).

<sup>25</sup>P. Ricoeur, *Die Interpretation. Ein Versuch über Freud* (Frankfurt, 1969), 30.

<sup>26</sup>In Plato’s *Symposium* (191d 3–5), Aristophanes says that we are “symbols” of men, since our original form was split in half by the gods. But it is not the broken halves of the ring or the cube taken by themselves that are the symbol. No, the

contrary, it is the visibility of a whole. Of course, what appears does not simply exhaust itself in its visibility.<sup>27</sup> Rather, it brings itself into play therein.

3. It may help to understand this better if we cast a lateral glance at the language game known as metaphor. Freedom, we have been saying, can express itself only if it intends more than it says. This “intending more” is what is known as metaphorical discourse.

Since the time of Aristotle, metaphor has been regarded as “ornamental discourse.” In other words, it is a kind of figurative circumlocution for something that could otherwise be stated “literally” and directly. You use metaphor for subjective-emotional and/or “pragmatic” (rhetorical) reasons. But the metaphorical expression adds nothing new to the content of the statement: “When we speak of understanding a statement, we mean that we can replace it with another one that says the same thing.”<sup>28</sup>

The truth is, though, that metaphors do not exist only because of subjective needs or motives—because of the abundance of language. They can also spring from a poverty of language, an objective lack. Sometimes there is no word for a thing that is nonetheless familiar to everyone. “In those cases, a metaphor . . . is required in order to be able to speak at all.”<sup>29</sup> Eberhard Jüngel cites an example from Aristotle: the sun’s emission of fiery heat. The Greeks, taking advantage of a certain similarity, spoke of “sowing heat.” Finding a metaphor that works in a case like this requires a special talent, one that is able to unite “linguistic

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symbol comes into being only when the two halves are joined into a whole. Now, the symbol is the token by which guests or business partners are recognized (*tessera hospitalis*). By the same logic, it is the symbol of the peculiar friendship tied up with hospitality, which the Germans actually call “guest friendship”: *Gastfreundschaft*. Of course, the actual coming together of the two halves is necessary, a point we still need to consider below.

<sup>27</sup>The symbol is other than the symbolized and, as such, it is a sign. On the other hand, the symbolized is, as Cusanus would say, non-other with respect to the symbol, which it comprehensively enfolds. It is this that makes the sign into a symbol.

<sup>28</sup>L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophische Untersuchungen*, 531, in *Schriften*, I, 452 (see note 15).

<sup>29</sup>E. Jüngel, “Metaphorische Wahrheit,” in P. Ricœur and E. Jüngel, *Metapher. Zur Hermeneutik religiöser Sprache* (Munich, 1974), 71–122; 91.

freedom, on the one hand, and a semantic sense of reality, on the other” (93).<sup>30</sup>

In spite of that, Aristotle remains committed to the idea that metaphor is a rhetorical figure that, as such, has no place in definition and argument. Otherwise there would be no protection against sophistical abuse (98). And then it was Nietzsche who claimed that all language is metaphorical, by which he explicitly meant to bid a final farewell to the truth. Truth, on his description, is a “shifting army of metaphors, metonymies, and anthropomorphisms” (82–86).<sup>31</sup>

Now, we can give precisely this thesis a positive twist, as Jüngel and Beda Allemann do (105). Yes, language does “bring” (*phore*) being “over” (*meta*) into words. Language means just this interplay of man and world (108). Metaphor is not a proof, of course—but why should it be anyway? “The happy metaphor, which can be more pointedly and accurately unambiguous than is comfortable for us, cannot prove itself, and does not need to, either. It has the force and dignity of an axiom” (110).

Let us illustrate this with an example from literature. Sigismund von Radecki tells this story about Else Lasker-Schüler: “Once she told me that she had tried to make Egypt appear in a poem, but that she always ended up with something long-winded. ‘Then,’ she continued, ‘I simply said: Egypt stood mantled in golden folds, and all of a sudden Egypt was there.’”<sup>32</sup> It was with these kinds of statements in mind that Wittgenstein went on to say in the note about understanding that we cited earlier (see note 28): We also say that we understand a statement “in the sense that it cannot be replaced by any other.”

These considerations have taken us beyond the poverty of language as something we have to make up for through creative substitution. They have brought us instead to a new and larger possibility of language. Now, instead of more or less sufficient information, language conveys *presence*.

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<sup>30</sup>See Aristotle *Poetics* 1459a 6f. “There are many possibilities of frightfully botching things, to say nothing of massive bad taste. There are quite a few instances of recent theological literature that could almost have been written to prove my point” (94).

<sup>31</sup>“Über Wahrheit und Lüge im außermoralischen Sinne,” *KSA I*, 873–890; 880.

<sup>32</sup>S. von Radecki, *Was ich sagen wollte* (Hamburg, 1958), 62.

5. *The person in play*

1. So if everything stands for something else in play, what does man himself stand for? If we say that he has become fully human in play, this does not mean that he should simply play himself alone. Man, after all, is a person.

It is true that the word “person” (mask) does not derive etymologically from the verb “personare,” since the “o” in “persona” is long, while it is short in “personare.” But the original meaning of “role, figure, character,” both in literature and in life, does tell us something about the ontological meaning of being a person. The person stands on his own two feet, ontologically speaking, and that is an inalienable property. But precisely in doing so, in other words, precisely *as* a person, he lives just as originally in and *as* relation. To be an “I” is to experience yourself as a “Thou” for another “Thou.” So we cannot play off the idea of being a self—substance—against relationality. The one is the condition for the existence of the other.

To play is to play together. At the beginning of this essay, we used this insight as a criterion to distinguish the play of young children from rule-following. It is one of Wittgenstein’s more well-known ideas that rule-following requires community. Even in the case of solitaire, community is one of the intellectual presuppositions of the game: it is there in the form of the instruction manual.

Playing together, though, means *trusting* someone and something else. I hasten to invite the reader to follow the instructions for playing this particular game. That is, letting yourself go in trust necessarily entails letting go of yourself. You have to experience something like an exodus into a foreign land, a kind of exile. The other—be it person or thing—in his otherness alienates the self-awareness that the self takes so much for granted. It endangers the self’s self-conception. And so play is always a risk. It is a risk to lay down a wager—especially when the stakes are yourself—on a game. After all, play does not just mean “that one plays with something, but also that something plays with the player.”<sup>33</sup>

This is true of all play. It is already true of animal play, for instance. The specifically human factor, though, is the fact that, in

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<sup>33</sup>F. J. J. Buytendijk, *Wesen und Sinn des Spiels* (Berlin, 1933), 117. My second epigraph is a play on this idea.

play, the player “plays *with* something, *as* something, or *for* something.”<sup>34</sup> The “as” refers to the “role” that one takes on; the “for” may be gain or victory, but what it really is is “the gift of joy, the beatification of a life with images and their possibilities” (224). In short, it is an experience of freedom. Which is precisely why it is not just “some thing,” but some one—other people—who plays the decisive role here.

At this point, the seriousness of play reemerges. This seriousness also suggests a plausible explanation as to why so many people never—and probably everyone at some time or another cannot—really manage to play.<sup>35</sup> Either we become grim addicts of a dogged pseudo-seriousness, or else we fool around and so waste our chance to get seriously involved in a game and its adventure. In both cases there is a lack of freedom to let go with magnanimous unconcern—whether what we let go of is something or someone else (in the first case) or ourselves (in the second case). This is what my second epigraph is driving at. It, too, has a double meaning, depending on how you take “play with.” On the one hand, it has to do with whether you let yourself get involved in the game along with others. On the other hand, though, it has to do with whether you are ready to let the playthings and partners you play with play with you in your turn—with you and in your company.

This is indeed a risk. But are we really prepared to say that the most important thing for man is balance and equilibrium, and not risk?

Rainer Maria Rilke has this to say about what is most fundamentally real for us:<sup>36</sup>

It *risks us*. It’s just that,  
more even than plants or beasts,

<sup>34</sup>F. J. J. Buytendijk, *Das Menschliche* (Stuttgart, 1958), 208–229; 212.

<sup>35</sup>Mt 11:17: “We played the flute, but you did not want to dance.”

<sup>36</sup>Dedicatory verses in one manuscript of the *Malte. Sämtliche Werke* (Frankfurt, 1955ff), II, 261:

er *wagt uns*. Nur daß wir,  
mehr noch als Pflanze oder Tier,  
*mit* diesem Wagnis gehn; es wollen; manchmal auch  
wagender sind (und nicht aus Eigennutz)  
als selbst das Leben ist—, um einen Hauch  
wagender . . .

we go along *with* this risk; sometimes we're bigger  
 risk-takers (and not for selfish reasons)  
 than life itself is—bigger  
 by just a breath. . .

2. Put another way, the basic form in which we live out our lives is that of exchange. A fundamental work of sociology on this topic is Marcel Mauss's investigation of the form and function of exchange in archaic societies, entitled *The Gift*.<sup>37</sup> The main focus of his inquiry, though, is the obligation to return gifts, which occurs in many forms: from the potlatch of the Indians of the Northwest to competition in modern society.<sup>38</sup> The degenerate form of what he describes is a kind of property dispute (65)—who gets to give the most?—in which self-affirmation is purchased by self-ruination. But let us ignore the degenerate forms. Rather, let us look beyond the distorted mask and try to get a glimpse of the true essence of “communication.”

We would probably do well to begin, still in a sociological vein, where Claude Lévi-Strauss took over from Mauss—with marriage as a form of exchange, specifically with the connection between the prohibition of incest and exogamy. For “the incest taboo is as much a positive rule as it is a negative prohibition. It enjoins marriage outside the family, which means entrance into a connection with members of a new unit.”<sup>39</sup>

Without a prohibition of incest, in fact, there is no society. This is why Lévi-Strauss puts incest on the same level as suicide: “negative communication that negates the existence of the other through an act of closing oneself off” (106). For the “elementary kinship structure—an atom of kinship, if one may put it like this—consists of a man, his wife, a child, and a representative of the group from which the man has received his wife, and never exclusively of another family with whom he is related by blood.”<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>37</sup>*Soziologie und Anthropologie*, II (Frankfurt, 1978), 261.

<sup>38</sup>“The French, for example, seek to outdo one another with New Year's gifts, festive meals, wedding celebrations, and simple invitations, and we still feel obliged to ‘revenge’ ourselves, as the Germans put it” (18).

<sup>39</sup>M. Oppitz, *Notwendige Beziehungen. Abriss der strukturalen Anthropologie* (Frankfurt, 1975), 105f.

<sup>40</sup>C. Lévi-Strauss, *Strukturale Anthropologie* (Frankfurt, 1967), 85f.; Oppitz, 108ff. This explains why Lévi-Strauss ends up connecting kinship and language (women,

It goes without saying, of course, that this sort of communication requires renunciation. In fact, a double capacity for renunciation is called for. On the one hand, there is the negative renunciation represented by the prohibition of incest. On the other hand, there is the positive renunciation that takes place when one relinquishes one's daughter, sister, or niece. The point here, though, is that what this example illustrates applies not only to fundamental anthropology, but also to exchange in general. That is, community is participation, participation that comes into being through the giving of a part in the whole, and so through a giving up. Now, community understood in this sense requires that, instead of using up what one has, one keeps it—not for oneself, though, but in the service of the act of passing on the gift one has received.

Play is risk, and, precisely because it is risk, it is also freedom. For freedom really exists only in the form of freely giving. Liberty, that is, is liberality,<sup>41</sup> as opposed, say, to obsessive self-assertion born of fear. The only person who is really free is the one who is able to *give* freely and fearlessly, and to give other things and people their *freedom*. The free man is the player who passes the ball instead of hogging it. Or the interlocutor who in a conversation—where, as the poet says, “one word gives another”—communicates . . . something of himself.

Exchange becomes a living reality in the form of participation in a game. Once that is established, though, our understanding of the goal and essence of freedom changes accordingly. The goal and essence of freedom are no longer primarily a matter of self-possession, but of being outside of oneself. Nor is being outside of oneself simply a matter of letting something go—so as to make self-preservation that much easier (think of the old image of ballast that you have to free yourself of in order to keep your ship above water or your balloon from falling). Rather, the paramount thing is to let *yourself* go, rather than clinging to yourself for dear life.

To be sure, what I am saying does not exclude reason and responsibility. Rather, the seriousness of the game actually requires both these things. The point is simply that both take on a different form from their usual modern guise. Francis Bacon set the program

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who are exchanged in marriage according to more or less complicated rules, take the place of words: 41–111; 74f).

<sup>41</sup>“Libertas—liberalitas” (W. Kern, *Mysterium Salutis*, II, 497).

for the modern versions of these things with his slogan that “*natura parendo vincitur*.”<sup>42</sup> This implies, however, an inversion of the relationship between obedience and dominion. The fact of the matter is that one does not follow the rules in order to master them, but masters the rules in order to follow them. Similarly, having the “mastery” of a language means fulfilling what the language requires. This is true, however, not just of language, but of all of the central acts of properly human life.

Or does anyone really think that the actual reason why we see, hear, smell, and taste is to “reconnoiter” the world as the first step towards struggling against, and overcoming, it? Isn’t the real point rather to perceive it as it really is, and, in doing that, to protect it? We do not see, hear, and so forth in order to live. Rather, we live in order to see, hear, and the like. Even less so do we love in order to live, but just the reverse. Life means relation, whereas lack of relation would mean death. But relation in turn implies correspondence. And co-correspondence has to do with responding, that is, answering, which presupposes listening. We can go even further and say that, strictly speaking, an answer—and this is clearer in the German: *Ant-Wort*—is nothing but hearing that itself has become a word. I am addressed, a claim is made upon me, and I give back a word. But what could you possibly have to say if nothing “spoke” to you first?<sup>43</sup>

And what could possibly please someone who refused to be pleased? The question is about something much deeper than having. It concerns the very core of what we are. No one starts out in the position of a sovereign self who can glory in his self-mastery. Nor can anyone become such a self unless he first finds himself within an already ongoing play, into which he is accepted and admitted. Only in this way can he come to himself.

“We are always playing. The smart people are the ones who know it.” This is the rather cynically disillusioned conclusion to which the character of Paracelsus in Arthur Schnitzler’s eponymous verse drama is finally driven.<sup>44</sup> But we do not have to take Schnitz-

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<sup>42</sup>“Nature is conquered through obedience” (*Novum Organum*, 13).

<sup>43</sup>“Since he couldn’t think of anything else, he decided to become creative.”

<sup>44</sup>“Dreaming, waking / Truth and lies: One shifts into the other, and you can never be sure. / We don’t know anything about others or even ourselves. / We . . .” (Es fließen ineinander Traum und Wachen / Wahrheit und Lüge. Sicherheit

ler's statement in the same sense in which he himself meant it. If we take it in our sense, then it is a very smart, if not wise, thing to say.<sup>45</sup>

## 6. Loveplay

1. On the other hand, Augustine's famous words at the beginning of the *Confessions* do not sound exactly serene: "Our hearts are restless." There are two kinds of restlessness. One springs from need, wish, and desire. And this kind of restlessness seems to intensify the more one's wishes are satisfied—like thirst intensifies when you drink salt water.<sup>46</sup> The Buddha's answer is a program for getting rid of the thirst. The other kind of restlessness, though, flows from the yearning to answer ever better, ever more adequately, a question, indeed, a wish that has been put to us. This is what Levinas means when he distinguishes between *besoin* and *désir*.

The implication of this is that there is a hankering after rest that is really just a desire to be left in peace. Certain sages have counseled that, if you want to be left undisturbed, then you have to be as unusable as a tree with unsound wood and inedible fruit. But then there is another kind of rest, which consists in having found one's "place," one's mission and purpose.

One could read Augustine—and it seems to me that this is how he read himself—as teaching that God is the highest good, in whose possession the striving of the finite creature comes to rest. The highest good, though, is also good-ness, benevolence. Benevolence, however, is not something you acquire by consuming it, but by exercising it.

"To know God is to know what to do." "The goodness of the good . . . diverts the movement it itself awakens . . . in order to redirect it to the other, which is the only way of orienting it to the

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ist nirgends. / Wir wissen nichts von andern, nichts von uns; Wir . . .) (*Ges. Werke. Die dramatischen Werke*, I [Frankfurt, 1962], 498). In H. Scheible's presentation of Schnitzler in the Rowohlt series of author studies, we find the nice remark: "Says Paracelsus, not me" (72).

<sup>45</sup>"You can always play. In other words, every condition can be represented in love" (I. Aichinger, *Kleist, Moos, Fasane* [Frankfurt, 1996]).

<sup>46</sup>"Every time you get your wish / You get a dozen more besides" (W. Busch, "Niemals," in *Schein und Sein*).

good in the first place.”<sup>47</sup> The Christian will want to put on the table that it is exactly in this way that one goes *with* God toward the other—and, at the same time, with the other toward God. This is a game for three players. Why? Because God created out of a wish for partners in loving.<sup>48</sup>

According to Aristotle, for living things being is living, and vice versa.<sup>49</sup> By the same logic, we would have to say that, for creatures endowed with spirit and freedom, being means being called to love, that is, being-in-communion.

2. Being-in-communion is a unity inclusive of polarity, though. Thus, one exists as a Thou, which knows *himself* to be intended by another (I); but also, at the same time, as an *I* that says Thou; says it, moreover, in a communal *We*. And it is in this unity of polarities that persons, as co-players, show themselves for what they are: the presence of the One who brought them out of nothing as co-actors in this play.<sup>50</sup> This is true of each person by himself—and for the joint play of the persons as such.

If this is true, then what is really at the heart of the seriousness of play is its religious implication. In the *Laws*, Plato, speaking of sacred games, has this to say: “In very truth, though, God is the one who alone is worthy of all blessed seriousness. Man, by contrast, is . . . only a plaything in God’s hand, and that is precisely what is best about him.” Someone might find this objectionable. But doesn’t Saint Thérèse—now officially a Doctor of the Church—think of herself as a top or ball for the child Jesus to play with?<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>47</sup>E. Levinas, *Schwierige Freiheit. Versuch über das Judentum* (Frankfurt, 1992), 29; “Gott und die Philosophie,” in *Gott nennen*, ed. B. Casper (Freiburg, 1981), 81–123; 106.

<sup>48</sup>Inspired by the teaching of Richard of Saint Victor, Duns Scotus comes up with a truly wonderful answer to the question “why did God create”: “*vult condiligentes*,” that is, he wants others who join him in loving (*Opus Oxoniense*, III, 32, 6, according to the Vives edition [XV, 433]).

<sup>49</sup>*De anima*, II, 4 (415 b3). Being is precisely not a matter of a thing’s first just happening to occupy space and then receiving some further determination on top of that. A dead lion, for instance, is not a lion that happens to be dead. Rather it is not—or is no longer—a lion at all. The most one could say about it is that it is a “former lion.”

<sup>50</sup>See my “Ich als Du. Philosophisches zu Person und Beziehung,” *ΘΙΑΘΕΟΣ/PHILOTHEOS* 6 (2006): 22–38.

<sup>51</sup>Plato *Laws* VII 803c; on Thérèse, see H. U. von Balthasar, *Therese von Lisieux*

Belief in creation excludes the idea that the world, and the history of the world, is a laborious process by which the absolute produces itself. To believe in creation is to reject the implication that work is the last word about reality. Similarly, reality, in a creationist perspective, does not spring from the urgent yearnings of suffering solitude, as if a desire to escape lonely want necessarily produced the world, or fateful neediness were the fundamental truth about being and life. The truth is quite different: Everything is the unconstrained gift of divine freedom understood as liberal giving.<sup>52</sup>

For this reason, the eye of faith perceives the world as a mirror reflecting the divine love in a great cosmic dance.<sup>53</sup> Hugo Rahner has assembled the patristic witness to this idea in his now classic text *Der spielende Mensch*. Of course, the Fathers were not being unserious escapists: consider how they include the Cross in their reflections on play. Man's answer to God's liberality is, according to Romano Guardini, the play known as the liturgy. This answer plays through countless variations on the theme of religion in both the past and the present. It reaches its apex, though, when we say Yes and Amen to God through Jesus Christ (2 Cor 1:20).

The highest form of this performance is not just the liturgy understood as a "service," in which God is the one who is served (though not without a role reversal: the one serving is none other than God's own Son). The supreme form of the performance enjoys this status as play, by which I mean: as a symbolic event. The first liberating step in the process of creating liturgy occurred when eating, a basic necessity of life, was transformed into the game known as the shared meal. But then the meal was transformed in the

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(Cologne, 1950), 264f.; English translation: *Two Sisters in the Spirit: Thérèse of Lisieux and Elizabeth of the Trinity* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992).

<sup>52</sup>See note 40. "Freedom freely gives and gives freedom." Duns Scotus speaks of *libera liberalitas*, free liberality, in order to reinforce the distinction between the liberality of the Creator and the necessary "overflowing" of an impersonal Good.

<sup>53</sup>Having said this, let me anticipate my final reflections by contradicting E. Fink who, in the school of Nietzsche and Heidegger, asserts that "the play of the world cannot be the play of a personal power" (*Spiel als Weltsymbol* [Stuttgart, 1960], 240). "The world is a game, but it does not belong to anybody, because it is only in the game that there is anyone—persons, men, gods—in the first place" (241). The world is indeed not mere seeming, but the appearance of something. But one of the main things it is the appearing of is the mythic relation "of cosmic night to cosmic day."

context of the sacrificial meal into a communion of human beings before and with their divinities. What we are dealing with now is a third transformation: the performance becomes doubly symbolic, precisely in finally becoming a “real symbol” in the sense we considered earlier.<sup>54</sup> The meal becomes the ontological presence of Christ in the midst of two or three gathered in his name (Mt 18:20). Indeed, the eyes of faith recognize his true body under the appearance of bread and his true blood under the appearance of wine.

To let oneself go by leaving behind the concrete troubles and fears of everyday life and entrusting oneself instead to this game is to confirm and nourish man’s freedom and, in doing that, his humanity. How are we to conceive of freedom if it is meant to take the seriousness of life as a game and the playfulness of life as serious business? Freedom has to be able to let go—of oneself and of others. Otherwise it cannot be free. Could it be, though, that, in the end, the only reason why freedom exists as such is to let go (of itself)?

3. So there is a “*commercium*,” a back-and-forth of exchange and intercourse between man and God. But this *commercium*, in the end, also makes present an uttermost—better, an innermost—quintessence: the play that goes on within the divine life itself. We need only meditate on the so-called “high-priestly prayer” (Jn 17). Here the Father and the Son are in conversation about us, without even asking our opinion. But once we have absorbed the shock, the whole picture suddenly changes: Is it really true that the Son could not find anything better for the Father, or the Father for the Son, than us?

To let oneself be played with. That has been our theme. May we say that the possibilities we ourselves can realize are in principle outstripped by the ones whose actualization we can only let happen to us?<sup>55</sup> Letting be is what enables man not to be “a player, but instead to be played, which means: to play *within the shelter of another*.

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<sup>54</sup>Let us admit that when we say a chair is “really” a bus, we mean “really” for us. But what must we reduce the words “really” and “reality” to if we want to claim, for example, that a piece of music is “really” just a rhythmic movement of air—or, to take an even more prosaic example, that a dollar bill is not “really” One Dollar, but “actually” just a piece of colored paper (provided rodents and insects agree not to nibble away at it).

<sup>55</sup>This is true, for example, in the sexual “potency” that consists in the capacity to be a father or a mother. The actualization of this potency is something that each of the partners receives from the other—and that both receive from the child.

. . . Man learns first-hand that the encompassing ground of his existence plays a wonderful game with him. The poet Charles Péguy has given away the name of this game. It is called ‘Qui perd gagne’—loser takes all.’<sup>56</sup>

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The ultimate, because abyssally original thing, that can be said about our topic—and a mere mention will have to suffice here<sup>57</sup>—is the three-person game of Father, Son, and Spirit, who take up their dwelling with us (Jn 14:23, 26). Now, they come to us out of a godhead in which they themselves eternally dwell with and in one another, in the exchange consisting of their reciprocal self-gift. This self-gift plays, with a glorious incomprehensibility, between the persons themselves, even as they themselves *play* it and *are* it. Even as God himself is it.—*Translated by Adrian J. Walker.* □

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<sup>56</sup>Bujtendijk, *Das Menschliche*, 229. If Paracelsus finds no certainty anywhere (note 44), we can draw once again on I. Aichinger and answer with another line from Rilke’s poem (see note 36): “that gives us security / beyond safety” (dies schafft uns, außerhalb von Schutz, / ein Sichersein).

<sup>57</sup>See my *Freiheits-Erfahrung* (note 10), Part IV: “Trinitarischer Sinn-Raum; Leben als Mit-Sein”; G. Greshake, *Der dreieine Gott. Eine trinitarische Theologie* (Freiburg, 1997).