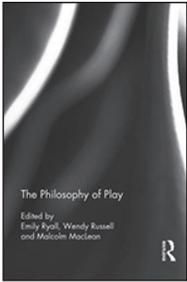


book review

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The philosophy of play

Edited by Emily Ryall, Wendy Russell and Malcolm Maclean (2013)

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Philosophy of play or play of the philosophy?

In the last 20–30 years a large number of books about play and games have been published, most of which focus on psychological and pedagogical issues. Philosophical approaches to play and games have not been quite as common, but there are exceptions. Some of the more important contributions have been Mihail Spariosus's seminal works *Dionysus reborn* and *God of many names*, Brian Sutton-Smith's *The ambiguity of play* and German books such as Alexander Aichele's *Philosophie als Spiel* and Ingeborg Heidemann's *Der Begriff des Spieles und das ästhetische Weltbild in der Philosophie der Gegenwart*. *The philosophy of play*, edited by Emily Ryall, Wendy Russell and Malcolm Maclean, is an excellent and comprehensive anthology of play, and also makes a profound contribution to the field. The 16 papers that form the content of this anthology were presented at a conference held in 2011. Play is analysed from many different philosophical viewpoints including Plato, Nietzsche, Wittgenstein, Gadamer and Deleuze. Each of the contributors has used one of the philosophical viewpoints as the foundation of their chapter.

Some authors have used Gadamer's magnum opus *Truth and method* to discuss the relationship between art, understanding, dialogue, language and play. In particular, Monica Vilhauer's luminous contribution, 'Gadamer and the game of understanding: Dialogue–play and opening to the other', enters into a dialogue with the reader and manages to outline the essence of Gadamer's philosophy of play. 'It is in the concept of play (*Spiel*) that we find the key, in Gadamer's philosophy, to understanding how it is that we must approach "the Other" for dialogue to be a fruitful and transformative event' (p 75). Vilhauer highlights that in spite of the height of the abstraction there is here a connection between Gadamer philosophical discussions and children's entirely concrete play world; furthermore, that a game will only succeed if children enter into an equal and playful dialogue with each other.

Rebecca Pitt links the emancipatory role of play to Sartre's *Being and nothing*. In Sartre's existential world, the so-called 'bad faith' prevails (we deceive ourselves, fail to take responsibility for our freedom), and play is appointed to be the dynamic that transcends the conventional mode of existence, as the bad faith is. In my view, this

paper is somewhat coloured by being an internal discussion with other connoisseurs of Sartre's philosophy.

Bernhard Suit's definition of play is twisted, and is the philosophical foundation in two papers by Randolph Feezell and Emily Ryall respectively. These papers are not easy to understand, unless you have prior knowledge of Suit's thinking.

Other authors such as Catherine Homan have presented Nietzsche's view on the relationship between art, play and the spectator. A refreshing paper by Stuart Lester discusses Deleuze's anarchistic playful philosophy.

Wall, Øksnes and Russell's papers are interesting and link easily with the experiences of playwork practitioners. They regard play as a concrete phenomenon, primarily present and observable in childhood. Wall writes in 'All the world's stage: Childhood and the play of being' about the lack of an ontology of childhood and play. He sketches three different views of play and childhood: a top-down approach, that associates childhood with disorder; a bottom-up approach, where childhood is identified with the good and innocent, and thus idealised and romanticised; and finally a third perspective, the developmental one, which emphasises that children, as soon as possible, shall become competitive in an increasingly globalised world. In contrast to these perspectives, Wall advocates for an ontology he calls 'childism', where childhood and play are accepted in their own rights and studied from a phenomenological perspective. Although Wall does not detail what an ontology of childhood might look like, a proposal for such an ontology is found in Maria Øksnes' paper on children's play and carnival. On the basis of empirical data, Øksnes interprets children's play as a festive carnival, a kind of counter-culture to the adult world. Wendy Russell writes about children's playgrounds from a spatial and phenomenological perspective.

In this review it is impossible to write about all the papers. However, I highlight the editors' introduction that outlines two perspectives about play: 'play as object' and 'play as subject'. The editors stress that play has traditionally been studied as an object, a phenomenon in time and space, especially prominent in childhood, and also in the adult world in the form of sports, games, festivals, lottery. However, play can also be interpreted as a subject, a dynamic movement back and forth (Gadamer's dialogue), to and fro (Deleuze's decentred thinking), opening up to the new and unexpected, or an experiment with randomness (one of Novalis's aphorisms). The editors summarise the collection by stating 'we are left wondering where this set of papers takes us in terms of what play does for philosophy and what philosophy does for play' (p 6).

The title of the anthology could as well be *Play of the philosophy*. Most of the papers do not conceive of play as a concrete phenomenon, but as an operative concept of philosophical matters that do not necessarily have anything to do with childhood and play. Wall stated, 'In fact, contemporary philosophies of play tend to be narrowly (if without always acknowledging it) on the experiences only of adults' (p 32). If I ask children whether adults play, they immediately answer 'no'. From a phenomenological point of view children do not perceive adults as players. It may well be that adults play, but their way of playing, philosophical or not, is qualitatively different from children's play world. This is a crucial matter and an important question for a philosophy of play: how to build a bridge between a philosophical understanding of children's bodily play world and a more metaphorical approach to play, centred round abstract conceptions as movement back and forth, to and fro, dialogue and openness, transformation, possibility, and virtuality. There are glimpses of such a discussion in the *Introduction*, in Wall's 'All the world's stage: Childhood and the play of being' and especially in

Stuart Lester's innovative 'Playing in a Deleuzian playground'. Lester wrote, 'The contention here is that playing may be seen as such a movement away from order, stability and predictability. It is the process of being a child becoming different and open to what it not yet is' (p 136).

Gadamer's philosophy is a central to this anthology, and subsequently play is associated with the development of virtues. An ethics of play! The editors interpret play 'as the space of the (Aristotelean) development of virtues over time, and as such further isolates play from the practice only of children' (p 9). This stance is an example of more abstract descriptions of play, which in my opinion is no longer in sufficient dialogue with the birthplace of play linked to the world of children.

There is a slight tension in the anthology between an approach to play as subject and an approach to play as object. More dialogue about these perspectives would have been a useful inclusion.

This anthology should be commended for its many different and sometimes provocative perspectives on play and games. I highly recommend it for provoking further discussion about 'what play can do for philosophy and philosophy for play'.