

Response to Jeffrey Israel's "The Capability of Play"

Drawing on Martha Nussbaum's "capabilities approach," Jeffrey Israel makes a strong plea for us to consider the capability of play as one of the fundamental prerequisites for societal human flourishing, one that should thus be protected and fostered by any government aiming to build a just society. He harnesses the tools of developmental psychology, ancient philosophy and ritual theory as well as examples that include the behavior of monkeys, the Olympic games and Emma Lazarus's poem "The New Colossus" to construct a description of play that extends its borders to include all non-instrumental activity framed to evoke ambiguity. There are certain advantages to Israel's expansive definition. Most importantly he is able to argue that his description of play is ubiquitous enough that it not only applies across human cultures but even across the borders between species. He is thus immune from charges of cultural specificity and flexible enough to accommodate culturally divergent attempts at self-description. This makes his account particularly advantageous for the field of religious studies, which has struggled to find explanations that are not functionalist or reductive to account for religious behaviors across cultures. The category of play, Israel compellingly argues, not only makes self-justification unnecessary, it positions demands for such explanations as a violation of the "ethics of play." The pay-off of Israel's description, he suggests, is an account that justifies the importance of play as a societal good valued for his own sake.

It is clear, however, that for Israel play is *instrumental* to the project of nation building. The framing device of labeling an activity or speech act "play" alters the way in which that activity is received, thus providing an opportunity for the voicing of cultural or ethnic tensions that simultaneously disarms hostility and ultimately fosters national unity. While I am deeply sympathetic with Israel's effort to make room for ambiguous modes of speech in the political sphere, I have two basic concerns with Israel's project, each of which concerns Israel's emphasis on the way in which play is defined by its frame. First, Israel's description of play is *so* expansive that it subsumes various and differing forms of cultural expression under one easy category, accounting for stand-up comedy, the Superbowl, and a poem within the same concept. I am not bothered by the

mixing of high and low cultural forms here, but rather by the way in which he groups together the aims and effects of these forms of expression. I do not doubt that all three *can* create the non-jingoist solidarity for which he is striving, but I also think that such an explanation is in danger of missing some subtle and not so subtle differences in the cultural usages of various instantiations of “play.” Competitive games, for example, often teach people to divide the world into allies and adversaries, and this, in turn, can provide a lens into human interaction that eradicates nuance and understanding rather than enhancing it. Two examples: On January 4, 2009, *The New York Times* ran an article on the ways in which the army was setting up video game arcades to lure in young recruits. Apparently the Army sees “play” as a means to frame aggressivity and thus put it to good use. In this case the effect is not to disarm feelings of hostility but subtly to cultivate them. During the World Cup Final of 2006, the Italian National Team incited violence on and off the field with its use of backwards and despicable slurs against the racially diverse French team. Once again, it was the frame of “play” that provided the necessary heat source to enflame latent bigotry. None of this, however, discounts the importance of Israel’s claim that we need to harness modes of communication or “meta-communication” to increase options for political speech. Nor do I want to discredit the possibility that analysis of “ambiguous non-instrumental activity” might be an ideal foundation for considering such modes of communication. In fact we find in a handful of twentieth century critical theorists a concern for exactly this issue, and indeed for the socio-political potential of what they name “*désouevrement*,” or “unworking,” a kind of play. I am thinking here of Georges Bataille and Maurice Blanchot, who develop this idea out of their engagement with Hegel via Kojève’s courses in the 1930’s, then of Jean-Luc Nancy whose notion of “literary communism” makes explicit the vision of community enabled by Blanchot and Bataille’s concern for “*déseuvrement*.”

But what distinguishes the perspective of these thinkers most pointedly from Israel’s is that at the heart of their interest in “unworking” lies a heightened suspicion regarding the dangers of social solidarity. The notions of unworking developed by both Bataille and Blanchot point to the way in which various forms of production effectively mask or suppress human finitude. For these thinkers, social fusion represents the promised dream of being a part of something that transcends the finite, the immersion in

something greater than ourselves: the body of Christ serves as one incarnation of this dream, the fascist state as another. For Blanchot, in particular, literature provides the model of a mode of unworking attentive to the risks at stake in cultivating social fusion. Some of Israel's broad examples of "play," such as group ritual or sport, are more prone to these risks than he seems willing to grant.

In his development of the social potential of Blanchot's conception of literature, Nancy opposes literature to myth. Whereas myth represents the means by which social fusion is created, by providing "a total belief, an immediate, unreserved adhesion to the dreamed figure," literature would be myth's interruption.¹ By emphasizing its own figurative or fictional status, literature expresses disjunction. As Blanchot puts it in the essay "Literature and the right to Death," Literature offers us Lazarus in his stinking tomb rather than Lazarus risen. It refuses to deny the corpse. By calling attention to its own language, to the materiality itself of language, literature disallows us from believing that finitude has been overcome. Here I am reminded of Israel's example of the poem "The New Colossus," in its relationship to the Colossus of Rhodes, which seems to incarnate exactly this dynamic. It resists myth by establishing itself as the interruption of myth, by calling attention to its ambiguous nature. The danger in Israel's expansive definition of play is that it risks collapsing the modes of myth and literature together, by including activities and expressions such as religious ritual or even national rituals such as the Olympic games in the same category with those cultural expressions which self-consciously call attention to their mode of expression, rather than merely relying on a framing device to differentiate them from work.

Separating out what we might call "literary" activities from "mythic" activities also requires identifying the difference between the creation of community and the goal of national solidarity. Here Jean-Luc Nancy is particularly helpful. He defines community as the "co-appearing" of finitude. This brief definition emphasizes the state of "being-in-common" as the appearance of the impossibility of becoming a "common

¹ Jean-Luc Nancy and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, "The Nazi Myth," *Critical Inquiry* 16 (Winter 1990) 306.

being.”² From his perspective, being-in-common is thus distinguished from solidarity, which he treats as the (quite dangerous) dream of overcoming finitude.

When I read Israel’s essay in a certain light I see him as emphasizing play as a mode that would insure that our dreams of social unity are exposed as both dangerous and impossible. When I read him in another light, however, I get the distinct sense that play provides the outlet for feelings of alienation and difference that would allow us to get on with the more serious work of nation building by way of a modern mode of myth-making. The problem is, his essay hasn’t given me the tools to tell the difference.

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² Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*. Trans. Peter Connor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991) 29.