

The Promise of Play

I want to thank Jeff Israel for his stimulating essay on the capability of play. Jeff has been my most stimulating intellectual companion for as long as I can remember, so in interest of full disclosure what follows should be seen more as a public version of our continuing discussion than as an “objective” review.

I want to focus my comments on three areas: what we mean by play; play as a way to respond to difference and create social cohesion; and the “state of play” today.

Jeff views play as “non-instrumental activity intended to frame ambiguity.” Each part of this view seems to capture something important about play, but each also opens up as many questions as it answers. Consider the parts in turn. Seeing play as “non-instrumental activity” captures a critical quality of its essential character—the way in which it is differentiated from the world of work, to do lists, and the tasks that define so much of daily life. Viewing play as non-instrumental helps us understand why play is often the domain of children; why play is often contrasted to work; why activities as diverse as soccer, improv comedy, and peekaboo are all forms of play. And yet, the work-play dichotomy can be a false one—while not all work is play, some work, particularly creative work, clearly requires a form of play. Writing an essay, designing a building and winning a dunk contest all require creative play in service of an instrumental end. Which raises a difficult question: If (particular kinds of) work require play, but there is a distinct entity known as “play” that is part of the work, then is this play instrumental action or not? I think the answer is both yes and no, and we might call this the work-play paradox: that certain types of work require play to be done well, but that play cannot be called forth exclusively in service of instrumental ends without losing what makes it play. (Hence why it is difficult to write well on deadline!) In this view, the reasons for which one plays can be instrumental, but play must retain its own non-instrumental qualities if it is to remain play.

The second part of the definition—“intended to frame ambiguity”—is equally telling. Again, it captures a range of types of play—most obviously intellectual or comedic play, but also baby play or sexual foreplay. In each of these varied examples, what makes it play is the essential indeterminacy of the activities, the refusal to linearly agree on the rules of engagement. But how would we fit games into this definition? Games of all types—board games, sports, children’s games—are defined by the fact that they have clear rules which govern permissible action. Rules cover any foreseen eventuality with the explicit intention of eliminating potential

sources of ambiguity. Officials are employed to arbitrate points of ambiguity—ball or strike, out or safe, fair or foul. Games are reassuring to children precisely because they are so clear in what is permitted and what is not. Of course, what makes games interesting is that they unleash infinite possibilities within finite rules; no two games of chess or baseball will have exactly the same sequence of actions. One might argue that this open-endedness is a kind of ambiguity, but it is not ambiguity in the usual meaning of the term.

The reason to stress ambiguity is not because it helps to provide an all-encompassing definition of all forms of play (the game case suggests it does not), but rather because it is particularly important to understanding a unique function that play can fulfill. And here is where Jeff offers what is to me his most exciting contribution: that play provides a mechanism of “metacommunication,” a way to respond to difference and to make “non-jingoistic solidarity possible.” Contrasting this view to either norms of rational discourse (Habermas) or a multiculturalism based in the politics of recognition (Taylor), Jeff identifies the role of play in responding to deep forms of difference and disagreement. Precisely because of play’s openness to ambiguity, Jeff rightly argues that play can simultaneously acknowledge “the social conceptions that divide us... and the social conceptions that unite us.”

I have two thoughts about this function of play. The first is that play, irony and humor are essentially a “double or nothing” strategy for responding to difference. At their best, they provide a healthy way to acknowledge deep histories of difference, neither pretending them away nor stepping gingerly around them. Friendships across racial or religious lines can often take the form of playing with these differences, and I think Jeff is right that comedians can also sometimes play this function for larger (including national) communities. At the same time, nothing can poison the waters faster than a joke gone wrong, an attempt at play that is misinterpreted or taken as offensive. In a sense, the paradox here is that play and humor require some shared social understanding to work effectively, when it is that very social understanding that play or humor are trying to create. But even given these risks, play is a highly under-utilized resource for responding to difference in a post-modern world, given its fluid and ironic approach to identity and difference, and its desire to confront rather than evade difficult truths.

The second thought is that when it serves this function, play is less of a “capability” and more of a kind of social glue. While the capabilities approach ultimately offers a way to judge political institutions and policies, its starting point is what *individuals* need to live a life of

minimal human dignity. But while play is a capability, it might be more fruitfully understood in dialogue with more communitarian visions of social solidarity and cohesion. Play is not only active but also interactive; however, its emphasis on ambiguity differentiates it from other accounts of social bonding. While communitarian visions have been critiqued for imposing unwanted conformity, play may not be susceptible to this critique because play's prizing of ambiguity allows play to build its connections on the backs of acknowledged differences. Moving from the normative to the empirical, a micro sociologist in the symbolic interactionist tradition might see in play an alternative to Durkheimian norms, a way of constructing a social order from the bottom up. There is much more to be said here; my point here is that situating play in discussion with these more communitarian visions may generate richer dialogue than placing it in the capabilities tradition.

Finally, as a sociologist, it would be difficult to comment on play without considering the central role it plays as a dividing line in our culture. Consistent with the capabilities approach, Jeff responsibly sidesteps these issues, arguing that the question of whether or not to restrict particular forms of play is a question for politics (see footnote 59). But if we were to offer more engaged social criticism, we might argue that much of what is troubling about post 1960s backlash politics is at base connected to an unhealthy rejection of play. The moral sociology that underlies conservative politics in recent years has centered itself on the importance of self-discipline, a familiar Protestant ethic view that associates work with virtue and play with hedonism and self-indulgence. Out of this divide is born the politics of resentment, with the painful toil of the deserving on one side of the divide, and the playful freeloading of the undeserving on the other. Rejecting this dour picture and reconnecting with a better vision of ourselves is perhaps intimately connected to reacquainting ourselves with a different tradition of play: one in which play provides a way for the self to grow; one in which connecting work to play unleashes the forces of creativity and productivity; and one in which play helps to form an ambiguous community out of a diverse and divided nation.

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