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Playing Before God: Theology and Play in Dialogue

I was beside the master craftsman, delighting him day after day, ever at play in his presence, at play everywhere on his earth, delighting to be with the children of men. **Proverbs 8:30-31**

Let there be a bond of union between the form-drive and the material drive; that is to say, let there be a play-drive, since only the union of reality with form, contingency with necessity, passivity with freedom, makes the concept of human nature complete.
Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*

The Christian Church's sometimes hostile relationship to any form of play has often been noted, as for example in Charles Neaves' poem "Let us all be unhappy on Sunday":

We zealots, made up of stiff clay,
The sour-looking children of sorrow,
While not over-jolly to-day,
Resolve to be wretched to-morrow.
We can't for a certainty tell
What mirth may molest us on Monday;
But, at least, to begin the week well,
Let us all be unhappy on Sunday

Or again, the Scottish singer/songwriter Michael Marra has observed that in Scotland today there are still communities that chain up swing-sets on Sunday—a practice which implies that playing can be sinful, at least if done on the most theological day of the week. Play likewise often returns the insult by making religion a frequent object of satire and ridicule, as for example with Moliere's *Tartuffe*, Monty Python's *Life of Brian*, and frequent episodes of popular shows like *The Simpsons* and *South Park*. But is the relationship between theology and play really as troubled as a first glance might indicate? A closer look at both play and theology might, I want to suggest, reveal some surprising affinities, and putting the two in dialogue with one another might just provide both with helpful correctives.

The Play of Body and Spirit

In *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*—the first work to attempt a description of play in the modern era—Friedrich Schiller defined the play drive as the force which reconciles material to form, that is, body to spirit. Body and spirit are two seemingly opposed drives within humanity. The first, which Schiller names the "sensuous drive" (*sinnlichen Trieb*), "proceeds from the physical existence of man, or sensuous nature" and "its business is to set him within the limits of time, and to turn him into matter" (79). The second, which Schiller names the "formal drive" (*Formtrieb*), "proceeds from the absolute existence of man, or from his rational nature, and is intent on giving him the freedom to bring harmony into the diversity of his manifestations" (81). In other words, the sensuous, material drive keeps us grounded in the minutia of this finite earthly existence while the formal, spiritual drive strives to dissolve matter in order to soar to the Infinite.

The two drives, therefore, appear to be at odds with one another as Schiller admits: "At first sight nothing could seem more diametrically opposed than the tendencies of these two drives, the one pressing for change, the other for changelessness" (85). Schiller warns that without limits both drives can take a person over and cause him/her to become a "non-entity", that is, if the sensuous drive takes over, it makes a person "merely a content of time, [so that s/he] ceases to exist, and has in consequence no content either", while if s/he is "only form, [then s/he] ceases to have a form." "In the first case", says Schiller, "[s/he] will never be [him/herself]; in the second [s/he] will never be anything else" (89, 91). And yet, the way to reconcile this situation is not to weaken either or both of the drives so that one is left with "physical impotence" or "spiritual flabbiness," but on the contrary to unite the two simultaneously through a third drive—the play drive:

> The sense-drive demand that there shall be change and that time shall have a content; the form-drive demands that time shall be annulled and that there shall be no change. That drive, therefore, in which both the others work in concert, the play-drive, would be directed towards annulling time within time, reconciling becoming with absolute being and change with identity. […] Both drives exert constraint upon the psyche; the [one] through the laws of nature, the [other] through the laws of reason. The play-drive, in consequence, as the one in which both the others act in concert, will exert upon the psyche at once a moral and a physical constraint; it will, therefore, since it annuls all contingency, annul all constraint too, and set man free both physically and morally. (97)

Here at the beginning of the modern discussion of play, we already have many of the paradoxes which thwart the precise definition of play. Play is outside time within time; it facilitates change while displaying identity; it both exerts moral and physical constraints and also sets humans free physically and morally. By this description, play is the force that holds together apparent opposites, reconciling them to each other without making either one weak or subordinate. Play does this by lessening the earnestness of the two drives: “the material drive, like the formal drive,” says Schiller, “is wholly earnest in its demands,” but “by entering into association with ideas all reality loses its earnestness because it becomes small, and by coinciding with feeling necessity divests itself of its earnestness because it becomes light” (105). Play, then, is the levity that overcomes the exclusive claims of both gravities and in so doing brings the two into relationship with one another. This leads to Schiller’s famous assertion: “man only plays when he is in the fullest sense of the word a human being, and he is only fully a human being when he plays” (107). Thus, by Schiller’s definition, play is about the reconciliation of the relationship between body and spirit and the restoration of human wholeness.

Such a concern is very close to the heart of Christianity. The traditional story of Christian theology (Creation, Fall, Redemption, New Creation) shows Christianity's concern with the relationship between body and spirit. Body and spirit were created in harmony (thus the spirit of Wisdom in Proverbs 8 plays and delights in the physical creation), but the Fall disrupts this relationship making it so that humanity is not only alienated from God and other humans but also from themselves. Christ's sacrifice on the cross provides the means for the redemption and reconciliation of this relationship, which ultimately will be restored in the new creation. Or again, Jesus famously summarizes the law and the prophets with the two-fold command of reconciliation: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength" and "love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22:37-39) in which human wholeness is the necessary condition of rightly loving and also perhaps its result. Moreover, for Christian theology the incarnation of God is the *en-flesh-ing* of spirit, the moment when infinity enters finitude, when sovereign freedom merges with limited contingency, when the immovable spirit takes boat trips, goes for long walks, and rides on the backs of donkeys.

For contemporary people—accustomed to or perhaps bored by the story of Jesus—the ridiculous and playful aspect of this doctrine is difficult to appreciate. Paul makes clear, however, that the ancient world was highly sensitive to this fact, as he says in 1 Corinthians: "Christ crucified is a scandal to the Jews and folly to the Gentiles" (1.23). And no wonder—God-incarnate's first miracle was making excessive amounts of wine at a wedding? He was a friend of drunkards and prostitutes? He taught spiritual truth by telling stories about sheep and trees? The story has always been a bit too playful for serious thinkers. In recent history, the Enlightenment rejected it because it was too bodily, too particular, and not rationally tidy whereas Post-Enlightenment thinking often seems to reject it because it is too spiritual, too universal, and not messy enough. To sum up then, theology, like Schiller's definition of play, has at its core a concern for the reconciliation of body and spirit and the restoration of human wholeness.

Liberation *From*: Play's Criticism of Theology

If Schiller is right—if the heart of play is a tension between formal and sensual, between freedom and constraint, between rule making and rule breaking, between spirit and body— and if this tension is all but impossible to perfectly maintain, then we should expect to find both players and theorists falling to either side of this divide. Schiller himself, for instance, after making these distinctions goes on to say essentially that the only true form of play is the one that produces high art after his classical ideal of beauty. One could say that Schiller was trying to strike a balance between the Enlightenment and Romanticism but still ended up on the side of the Enlightenment. The 20th century, of course, saw a strong reaction against the Enlightenment, and thus in the realm of play theory a much greater emphasis on the sensual and bodily aspects of play. Along with this emphasis on the body and the physical side of play came a greater interest in freedom and play as a means of liberation from monolithic powers. Two thinkers readily demonstrate this trend—Jacques Derrida and Mikhail Bakhtin.

In Derrida's notion of "free play," language is described as the infinite play of signifiers. Play is the force which destabilizes, de-centers, and liberates meaning from those who would ground it in a stable or fixed interpretation. For example, in "Structure, Sign, and Play" he says, "the nature of the field—that is, language and a finite language—excludes totalization. This field is in effect that of *play*, that is to say, a field of infinite substitutions only because it is finite" (289). Play, then, is the foundational principle of deconstruction whose goal (if it can be said to have any *telos*) is to liberate meaning and interpretation from the powers which control and regulate them. In "This Strange Institution Called Literature" he remarks, "Deconstruction perhaps has the effect, if not the mission, of liberating forbidden *jouissance*" (56). Liberating pleasure, in other words, is the proper result of play.

Bakhtin's concept of the "carnivalesque", which he lays out in *Rabelais and His World*, similarly emphasizes the liberating power of play:

> The carnival-grotesque form exercises the same function: to consecrate inventive freedom, to permit the combination of a variety of different elements and their rapprochement, to liberate from the prevailing point of view of the world, from conventions and established truths, from clichés, from all that is humdrum and universally accepted. (34)

This liberation is achieved by a strong focus on the bodily, material aspect of existence: "The essential principle of grotesque realism is degradation, that is, the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract; it is a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body" (19). Bakhtin's language here closely reflects Schiller's two drives, but while play does act as a sort of mediator which brings the body and spirit into contact, it clearly advantages the sensual, material drive in the play transaction. Many literary critics, therefore, as R. R. Wilson points out, use carnival as "a synonym for undoing, for transgression, for destruction, and for replacement" (41). Such a characterization of Bakhtin is, I think, unfair, but it does highlight how play theory, especially in literary studies, has turned toward viewing play largely as Schiller's bodily, material, anarchic drive rather than his formal, spiritual, rule-shaping drive.

Moreover, within their discussions of play both Derrida and Bakhtin criticize theology and its tendency to spiritualize and formalize. Derrida associates Christianity with the history of Western metaphysics, calling it "ontotheology" and saying that it is "turned towards the lost or impossible presence of the absent origin" and is therefore "saddened, negative, nostalgic, and guilty" ("Structure" 292). Bakhtin, meanwhile, notes how early church theologians such as Tertullian and John Chrysostom condemned laughter, jesting and play, with the result that in medieval times play and humor were relegated to the unofficial feasts. To the extent that the church represented monolithic seriousness, Bakhtin says that "it oppressed, frightened, bound, lied, and wore the mask of hypocrisy" (94). Whereas carnival was "the true feast of time, the feast of becoming, change and renewal," the official feasts of the church "asserted all that was stable, unchanging, perennial" (9-10). According to Bakhtin and Derrida, then, theology historically has a tendency to overvalue Schiller's formal spiritual drive and in so doing to belittle the sensuous, bodily drive.

This indeed seems to be a fair if generalized assessment of the history of Christianity. Though as noted above, the doctrine of the Incarnation and many other teachings of the church maintain the mutual significance of both body and spirit, the temptation of the church has usually tended towards Gnosticism (the belief that material existence is dirty and corrupt, while the mind and spiritual existence is pure and the locus of salvation). To those who will listen and play along, play liberates theology from this dangerous tendency, allowing Christians to remember the goodness and joy of physical existence so that like the spirit of wisdom in Proverbs they too can play before God and delight in physical creation.

Liberation *For*: Theology's Criticism of Play

The danger of conceiving play purely as transgression, as the overthrowing of all external authority, is that play might itself become a sort of despot. Derrida's "free play," for instance, makes play the precondition for the functioning of language and the conceiving of existence. In *Of Grammatology* he says that "*the game of the world* must be first thought; before attempting to understand all the forms of play in the world" (50). Moreover, Derrida's play excludes anything else from totalization, from becoming a fixed and stable point from which to interpret reality, but in doing so play itself becomes a totalizing force. Thus, as R. R. Wilson comments, play "makes signification possible, but is itself monological, monistic, and mute" (43). Play may liberate forbidden *jouissance* (or pleasure), but it also becomes a rigid captor—language becomes a prison-house. Liberty becomes a new form of tyranny. Suddenly play does not seem very playful.

A theological understanding of freedom is helpful at this point. In his letter to the Galatians, St. Paul says, "For freedom Christ has set us free." Christians are to be the liberated people of God, but Paul goes on to say, "do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another" (5.1, 13). Freedom, ironically, is a gift which cannot be directly pursued even once one has been given it; rather, if one does not want to again "submit to the yoke of slavery" one must willing sacrifice personal freedom in order to love and serve others. Freedom which does not willingly serve soon becomes a tyrant and loses its freedom.

This is why Jürgen Moltmann in his book *Theology and Play* says that "a critical theory of play must begin with the question: *Cui bono*? Whom does it serve?" (31). Is play serving to promote human liberation and wholeness, or is it perpetuating practices that alienate human from human, humanity from creation, and humanity from God? Moltmann notes, for instance, how the rulers of Rome promoted games as a means of drugging the masses so that they would not notice their oppression. In other words, not every instance of play or theory of play is actually liberating. To return once more to Schiller, the formal, spiritual drive must purify and correct some of the excesses in play which result when one depends too heavily on the sensuous, bodily drive. Play needs both body and spirit if it is to be both joyful and liberating.

In conclusion, by this description of play as a reconciling force between body and spirit that liberates humanity and promotes wholeness, theology is quite a game. Moltmann, for example, says that the game of theology is “the liberating game of faith with God against the evil bonds of fear and the grey pressures of care which death has laid upon us” (38). And the French philosopher Jean-Luc Marion adds that “theology, of all writing, certainly causes the greatest pleasure. Precisely not the pleasure of the text, but the pleasure—unless it have to do with a joy—of transgressing it: from words to the Word, from the Word to words, incessantly and in theology alone, since there alone the Word finds in the words nothing less than a body” (1). Thus, not only does theology playfully strive to liberate humanity, it also liberates pleasure and joy. Far from being the discipline for “zealots made up of stiff clay” or “sour-looking children of sorrow,” then, theology might just be one of the most playful modes of interacting with the world.

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