

The Set's Game-Play of Sets

Let's begin brutally—by two quotations. One is from Marx. He writes in *Capital* that the capitalist system prevents the worker from enjoying his work “as play of his own corporal and spiritual strengths.” The other is from Heidegger. He writes in *The Onto-theo-logical Constitution of Metaphysics*: “the essence of Being is Game-play itself.” These two quotations are not totally isolated, fortuitous, or arbitrary. In *Capital* again, Marx writes, playing on the word “play”: “at the same time that mechanical labor assaults to the utmost the nervous system, it oppresses the varied play of muscles and usurps any free corporal or spiritual activity.” And in *The Essence of Reason* Heidegger asks: “must we think Being . . . based on the essence of game-play?” Marx feels that alienation and exploitation prevent the worker from displaying his activity as game-play. Capitalism's aimed suppression would therefore allow man's multifarious activity to be manifested in and as play. Thus the distinction would be abolished: work (necessary) and game-play (free). Marx had this thought in a flash, but did not pursue it thoroughly. Heidegger succeeded in thinking that game-play constitutes the essence of Being, Being to be thought of as based on game-play and not the other way around. Heidegger thought this thought in all its flashing brevity, but did not insist upon it, did not draw all its consequences and even appeared to abandon it. Marx, on the ontological horizon, thinks *ontico-* (ontologically): he thinks man's productive and technical labor thanks to which the world's self-production is accomplished. It is this practical, universalizing labor which could become game-play. Heidegger, invaded by the “ontical,” thinks *ontologico-* (ontically): he thinks the meaning of Being which has been forgotten by human beings, Being and human being belonging to each other. It might be that the meaning of Being resides in game-play.

Marx and Heidegger try to surpass philosophy, which is equal to metaphysics—between them sits the modern thinker of game-play, the one who lends his ear to the voice of Heraclitus: Nietzsche. Their thought could be called metaphilosophical, in that it no longer commands the World or Being to obey a transcendent, ideal principle, source of Truth, Goodness, and Beauty.

But how and where do we encounter the philosophy and thought which go beyond, namely, Game-play?

Let's begin by seeking the place and situation of game-play.

In the vast Set of fundamental forces adjoining man's play and the world's play, we find game-play. With language and thought, work and struggle, love and death, it is manifested, in this Set, as human play, set of games in the world. The fundamental forces penetrate the great powers whose set informs the play of fundamental forces and tunes it to the play of the mediated world. These great powers are: magic, myths, and religion; poetry and art; politics, philosophy, science and technology. The interplay of the fundamental forces set with the great powers set is based on the *play of logos and praxis*.

The game which assists man's play and world's play has, since Plato, always been thought metaphysically—in terms of non-play, specifically in terms of ideas (governing play and non-play). Since Hegel this idealistic philosophy has seen its completion and its end. Then what has come to pass in philosophical thinking?

Philosophy has been the basis for the sciences. Its set is now becoming explicit in a set of sciences. This set contains two sub-sets (this division not being sufficiently problematical):

- a) the natural sciences
- b) the social sciences

Among the latter dominates the set: logic, logistics, linguistics, psychological anthropology, sociology.

What has become of philosophy?

1. It mediates in the history of philosophy.
2. It is being replaced—precisely—by the sciences.
3. It is moving, beginning with pre-philosophy, toward a metaphilosophical thought, a questioning, multidimensional thought, global and fragmentary, open, world-wide and planetary.

To be noted in this process—if one likes bookkeeping—a loss and a gain. The loss: the sciences do not think but produce, operate, and transform *techno*-scientifically. The gain: the possible surpassing of fixed ideas.

All philosophical thinking thought the World's Being—the becoming of the fragmentary, fragmented totality of the open, multi-dimensional world—in three forms, bringing it always to an intra-mundane being (“étant”):

1. as *logos-physis* (the Greeks)
2. as *logos-God* (the Judeo-Christians)
3. as *logos-man* (the modern Europeans)

The three philosophies constitute the only three great philosophies of (thinking) humanity. They exist synchronically and diachronically, the latter being clearly more marked and marking (perhaps more?) the history of thought.

Physis dies when God is revealed. God begins to die by becoming man—the son of God and the son of man who dies on the Cross—and will die “for once and for all” when he is killed by man, the Subject, who puts himself at the center of all that is. Man himself is however running toward his own surpassing. With the end of philosophy, humanism is also being finished off—in imperfection and incompleteness. Man, objective subject, thinking and active, has already begun to enter the era of his demise, an ending destined to last a long time. The social sciences do not constitute man. On the contrary. As one of today's protagonists of the social sciences—Lévi-Strauss—writes, without wholly comprehending the extent to which what he says, is far-reaching: “the final goal of social science is not to constitute man, but to dissolve him.” Dissolve him into what?

How was “world-play” already articulated? So it was more or less clearly, more or less completely, by Heraclitus and by Plato; in *Proverbs* (by Solomon); by Schiller and Novalis; by Marx, Nietzsche and Heidegger (already quoted); by Fink.¹

Little by little perhaps the meaning of the word “game-play” is

¹ Cf. “Brève Introduction au jeu du monde” and “Schéma du jeu de l'homme et du jeu de monde” in *Arguments d'une recherche* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1969) and naturally, that is to say not ludicrally, *Le Jeu du monde* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1970).

becoming clear: as world-play. Here game-play no longer means human play or intramundane play, but game-play of the world “itself,” world as play, display of play in which (the play of) man and (the play of the) world—to make one—meet. Man is the player par excellence. But he is also the constantly played upon. The world no longer obeys—while still obeying—fixed or supposed rules. It engulfs these rules as well as their permutations (“combinatoires”). For all these sets ruled like the Set of sets offer us *above all* interpretations and donations of intraworld meanings. World-play which plays with man’s play and world history play is stronger than we—we who play it.

Fundamental forces and great powers are caught in the specific sets of game-play; they and their sets. Linguistics views *language* as a combinatory system, as a game of signs and rules. Logic as logistics treats *thought* as a self-regulated cybernetic game. Work, according to the Marx’s “economics” and “politics,” must become game-play, and different games are put in motion, in the struggle aimed at the conquest of power. The various games of *love* seek form-and-content of love in the planetary era: from almost immediate sexuality, through the erotic, to the problematical figure of the family. Finally, we play with *death*. Mortal games which subjugate us. Meanwhile we play several private games. Play itself is neither serious nor ludrical, neither necessary nor free. *Mythology*, contemporary mythology, codifies all the myths and plays with them assisted by electronic apparata, by computers. Even a little demythologized, *religion* persists in playing the mythological game, linking, in the domain of the sacred, man’s play to divine play. *Poetry* and *art* are becoming more and more explicitly play.² The empirical play, and not merely empirical, of world *politics* continues to be played, with and in spite of its protagonists. It is

²Different novels and theatrical plays carry the game to language. It is not a question of naming all of them here. Think of Dostoevsky who, in *The Gambler*, speaks of the problematics of man in general. Hermann Hesse in *The Bead Game* tells the story of a small elitist republic which does not produce culture per se but combines, in a unifying relational game, all the forms of past culture. In a science-fiction novel, *The World of the Non-A’s* (non-Aristotelians), Van Vogt depicts a game machine that makes governmental policy decisions on planet Earth. Following Pirandello and his game of roles, Beckett stages the game (*play*) of the human comedy, of that *Endgame* endlessly unwinding *Krapp’s Last Tape*, beyond the sensitive and the absurd, beyond tragedy and comedy, in the nihilistic repetition of the game.

increasingly determined by the games of *technology*, and *science* informs it. (Mathematics and political economy, for instance, consider probability calculations and corresponding strategies as the principal elements of game theory.) Thought itself, which questions the deceased philosophy and the “technicized” sciences replacing it, attempts to think the game, to wit, the world-game, the game linking man and world, namely the Set of sets.³

The world-game is an anticipatory word having effected nevertheless the step which steps back; it shapes the space-time of the game of all thoughts and all experiences, including those that occult and refuse it. There is no password or slogan for a new world view in this era of slogans and visions of the world. Planetary thought of world-play—having already begun to be exercised but remaining for the future—constitutes our major task. While various game plans and schemes motivate us, we ourselves try to experience and think them. While all the gaming partners and adversaries become problematical, we ourselves refuse to do what is in question—interrogating us while we interrogate it—something objective and absolute.

For what can we think and do during these passing times?

1. One can revivify the old absolute, logos-God, death, by doing demythologized mythology, by devoting oneself even to the theology of God’s death or by making sacrifices to theories and practices of a profane religiosity.

2. One can launch into scientific research, highly technicized, techno-scientifically attacking the two other ancient absolutes: nature and historical man. Thus the sets of natural science and social science are founded and progress, yet the set of the two sets do not manage to constitute Science.

3. One can devote oneself to politics, pragmatic or messianic, aim at consolidation of managerial administration and power or its overthrow.

4. The quest for Being can be continued through a thought thinking its forgetfulness and its retreat, retreat retiring itself and

³Cf. “An Introduction to Planetary Thought” in “Planetary Interlude,” *Yale French Studies*, 41, 1968.

leaving us flat—following the path of Parmenides and Plato, Kant and Heidegger.

5. One can begin to think the world-game—assuming all the roughness of existence—through its grammar and syntax, listening to its call, thinking it with the aid of a playful, flexible, coherent thought, although lacking a basis, accepting the adjoining of opposites—following the path of Heraclitus, of Hegel-Marx and Nietzsche.⁴

6. One can prolong, sometimes by innovating, the exercises and small games of writing which perpetrate, under theoretical, poetic, literary, scriptural pretexts, the various scripturations more or less insignificant of dissignificative-ness.

These six possibilities are open to us, whereas philosophy-metaphysics, even though finished and already surpassed, will continue to survive, in several ways.

For those who are tempted by the possibility of thinking the world-game, one question surfaces, a question which asks: how do we pass from the world-game and games in the world to world-play and from the latter to the former? The answer that can be formulated says: thanks to man, passing being, being passing through. It is “in” men that the interplay of questions and answers takes place between man and world. For these two sets tend to make a set of sets.

The set of energy-matter, the set of living matter, the set of neuro-physical and sociohistorical energy are not without antagonisms, oppositions, and contradictions within each set and between the sets. Each system, each structure of play possesses a force of attraction and a force of repulsion. The process toward homogeneity (association) corresponds, in squaring and completing it—if not in exploding it—to the process toward heterogeneity (dissociation). These two combined and alternating processes are opposed both inside each system and in the System of systems. Why? Because there is never rigorous, complete actualization. Precisely because of the contradictions and the imminent antagonisms. Things are being played in the world. Very surely. Both potentially and on the level of actualizations. *That* “is” the game.

⁴It goes without saying that the fourth and fifth possibilities are tied together.

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What is consequently of concern for us readers and makers of games and play? Our task consists in knowing how to read in every world-game every other game and, primarily, world-play. (And not only read, but play: by overthrowing the rules where need be.) By experiencing the plurality of perspectives with regard to every problem (which surpasses the subject-object opposition). It is a question of being serenely and sadly in touch with world-play—the unsayable, the unnameable, the unplayable—without hastily forcing it into little systems which claim to exhaust it with their reductive, unilateral, imperialist methods. Be prepared for the game-play requiring of us the games of language and thought, work and struggle, love and death: by trying, if we are willing, to reach the summits. Elite players or an elite of players probably do not exist any more. There are, however, those whom we need and who productively amplify and intensify the rules, or rather, the *game style*—for us players who are still on the way. For the game ceaselessly eludes us. However, that is what inspires us. We probably must learn to admit—nakedly and audaciously—that all is foiled [*déjoué*]. All the games being already played. Consequently, it simply remains for you also to play upon [*déjouer*] the game of the Set of sets, the subject of this lecture, unheard, the subject of this text, undeciphered.

Translated by Beverly Livingston