

Playthings of the gods

On the “magic circle” metaphor in Johan Huizinga’s *Homo Ludens*

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Abstract

In Johan Huizinga’s famous 1938 *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*, “magic circle” is used a few times as a metaphor typifying the hallmark of “play”. This article focuses on the last pages of the volume, where the metaphor is mentioned twice for a reason that concerns Huizinga’s entire project. This close reading shows that the metaphor supports Huizinga’s attempt to save his play theory against the objection of relativism: his claim that “all is play” might be interpreted as discrediting all serious truth claims. The “magic circle of play” might call up the abysmal character of all theory, his own one included. The only remedy he apparently can come up with is to make an appeal to antique Platonism.

Play

Why does Huizinga typify play as “magic circle”? And, to begin with, how in *Homo Ludens* does he conceptually define “play”? Despite what the title, *Homo Ludens*, might suggest, Huizinga is not up to defining human beings as playing beings. That suggestion is adjusted by the subtitle, *A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*, or in the more cautious original Dutch formulation: “*Proeve van bepaling van het spelelement der cultuur*” [attempt to define the element “play” of/in culture]. So, Huizinga studies only an element in/of culture: one of its elements, not specifically the element typically for it, the element that delineates culture from nature. Indeed, playing is a common element of nature and culture, so we read already in the first lines of the first chapter:

Play is older than culture, for culture, however inadequately defined, always presupposes human society, and animals have not waited for man to teach them their playing. We can safely assert, even, that human civilization has added no essential feature to the general idea of play. Animals play just like men.¹

Human play adds nothing to the play of animals and, even, “to the general idea of play”. But does “the general idea of play” add something to how the human is defined? It does indeed. For, humans also play where they themselves might think to do it the least.

So, Huizinga mentions the definition of man as “animal rationale”, since Aristotle a widespread common-sense idea. And, so Huizinga states even that rational activity is in fact a matter of playing. The human mind *plays*. Maybe not exactly the way animals do, but the instrument that allows man to be rational, i.e. his mind, is playing. As much as he is a *homo rationale*, he is a *homo ludens*. As *homo rationale*, he is a *homo ludens*. So, unlike the subtitle of Huizinga’s book suggests, “play” *does* more or less define human being as such. A few pages farther, we read:

But, whether you like it or not, in acknowledging play you acknowledge mind. For play, whatever its essence [wezen] might be, is not matter [stof]. Even in the animal world it bursts the bounds of the physically existent. From the point of view of a world wholly determined by the operation of blind forces, play would be altogether superfluous [in de volste zin des woords een *superabundans*, een overtolligheid].²

“Whether you like it or not”. What is it that we might not like? That play implies an acknowledgment of the mind as being not matter, not simply a material thing. What Huizinga states here is that the human mind not simply follows the logical laws ruling the realm of matter, as claimed by modern sciences. So, what we do not like is that “play” escapes the grip of our scientific logic. Play “bursts the bounds of the physically existent”; it breaks the logic that our science discerns in the physical phenomena. It transgresses the logical rules of our scientific rationality. It introduces something “*superabundans*” – something excessive and superfluous – into the logic of a rationally ordered world. Huizinga continues:

Play only becomes possible, thinkable and understandable when an influx of mind breaks down the absolute determinism of the cosmos. The very existence of play continually confirms the supra-logical nature of the human situation. Animals play, so they must be more than merely mechanical things. We play and know that we play, so we must be more than merely rational beings, for play is irrational.³

“Play is irrational”. Play, so Huizinga states, is the element in both animal and human life that cannot be reduced to the rational. And what, then, is the rational?

1 Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 1.

2 Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 3. I adopted the English translation that is rather misleading here, if not to say wrong: “But in acknowledging play you acknowledge mind, for whatever else play is, it is not matter”.

3 Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 3.

Rational/Irrational

For Huizinga, rational is the logic that rules the sphere of labor and technique as well as the one of economy and physical reality – a logic of our scientific approach to reality, having utility as its first rule. The rational is also the determining logic underlying *living* phenomena. Living, too, is determined by a strict logic, by a “mechanic”, oriented toward an end, a goal. Eating, for instance, is logically based in the organism’s hunger, on the logic of self-preservation, which is the principle of life functionality. That is the *reason*, the *ratio*, of eating. Playing starts when that *ratio* is put aside, when an animal behaves with respect to eating not to get fed but to have fun, to *play* with food. A hungry cat can catch a mouse and eat it. This is not play. But it can catch it and for hours have fun with it. That is play. “Fun” is, according to Huizinga, that what ultimately defines play. And he adds, fun “resists all analysis, all logical interpretation. As a concept, it cannot be reduced to any other mental category”.⁴

When Huizinga describes playing as not logical, he particularly means that it is not *teleological*. Playing means doing something, just for the sake of doing it or, what amounts to the same thing, just for fun. In that sense, playing means freedom, freedom from the determining laws of nature or, as Huizinga puts it, of “matter”. So, the activity of our mind is a matter of fun; it is free and does what it does for the sake of doing so. It is a matter of playing.

Human nature obeys nature’s *ratio*. But human culture, more than animal life, is also ruled by a practice that breaks with such *ratio*. There, *play* dominates. It is the challenge of Huizinga’s study to show how the principle of “play” is at work in all domains of culture, including the domains where we expect it the least: even in the ones of “knowing” (chapter VI; in Dutch “Wijsheid”, “Wisdom”) and law (chapter IV). Or, as Georges Bataille in a review of Huizinga’s book summarizes:

[Huizinga] sees the play [le jeu] at the origin of all forms of culture, of religion, of literature, of music, of dance, of juridical and war institutions, and of philosophy. In Huizinga’s more conceptual language: human culture is basically play; only technique, at least production within the limits of utility, are clearly out of the sphere of the play.⁵

Play defies, disturbs, and transgresses the rational. It shows what Huizinga calls “the supra-logical nature of the human situation”.⁶

“Magic circle”

Play raises man above the blind, deterministic logic of nature and society, by playing. So, theater, movies, novels, et cetera *play* natural and societal life. Of course, man is bound to his natural condition, but in his culture, he *plays* that condition. On the stage of play, he is unbound by deterministic laws. There, he is free. There, as said, he does things for the sake and the fun of doing them. What he then is doing there is, so to

4 Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 3.

5 Bataille, *Oeuvres Complètes XII*, 102–103; translation MDK.

6 Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 3.

speak, turning in circles. In that sense, play is a kind of “magic circle”. Only a few times in *Homo Ludens*, Huizinga uses the term, never as a defense of real magic but only in a broad and mainly negative sense.⁷

At the end of the last chapter on the “play-element in contemporary culture”, he discusses the basic thesis in the political theory of the German constitutional law specialist, Carl Schmitt. Schmitt’s thesis says that all politics is rooted in the unreconcilable opposition between friend and enemy.⁸ This is the “serious” level of politics, Schmitt states. There, play has no longer a place. War is the point where politics becomes exclusively serious. For Huizinga, it is nothing less than “Schmitt’s barbarous and pathetic delusion”. To him:

It is not war that is serious, but peace. Only by transcending that pitiable friend-foe relationship will mankind enter into the dignity of man’s estate. War and everything to do with it remains fast in the daemonic and magical bonds of play.⁹

Culture is play. To Huizinga, even war is that. Only, war is bad play, a “daemonic and magical bond of play”. For him, it is clear: although play disturbs ridged rationality and listens only to its own lust, it is a serious thing. The dichotomy between play and seriousness is the first he discusses in his book, concluding that indeed playing is serious. At least, it is serious the way in which for a child play replaces the real world. A child cannot play that “chairs” are “trains” if it does not absolutely believe that, even when it perfectly knows it is playing.¹⁰ Play is serious or is not. But is it *really* serious? Is it as serious as, for instance, war? Is it even *more* serious than war, as Huizinga puts it in reaction to Carl Schmitt’s thesis?

It is here that Huizinga adds to his theory of the seriousness of play a moral and even ontological argument. The seriousness of play indicates that it is oriented toward the good and, consequently, toward truth. That is why, in response to Schmitt, he quotes a passage from Plato’s *Laws* (VII, 803), where we read that play *does* orient toward the good and truth – in Plato’s words, toward “god” – only because men and women are “god’s playthings” [speeltuig van God].¹¹

What is more, Huizinga has prepared this Platonic reference already in the very beginning of his book by quoting exactly the same passage from *Laws*.¹² The context of the passage in Plato’s work is a discussion about how to educate in dance and music. Dancing and making music are a matter of playing, and as all kinds of play, those too must be taken seriously and support man’s alliance with true being. Plato writes:

7 Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 11, 20, 77, 210, 212.

8 Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 208–209. For an extensive review on Huizinga’s reading of Schmitt, see Lambrow, “The Seriousness of Play.”

9 Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 209; adjusted translation.

10 Think of the story in which Huizinga mentions of a father, who found his four-year-old son sitting at the front of a row of chairs, playing “trains”. As he hugged him, the boy said: “Don’t kiss the engine, Daddy, or the carriages won’t think it’s real” (Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 8). A few pages farther, he writes that fathers, too, can be totally absorbed by the play they are in, and although knowing they play, they can react in an extreme, even *lethal* way: “With us, a father of somewhat childish disposition might get seriously angry if his children caught him in the act of preparing Christmas presents. A Kwakiutl father in British Columbia killed his daughter who surprised him whilst carving things for a tribal ceremony” (Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 23).

11 Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 211–212.

12 Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 18–19.

I say that a man must be serious with the serious, and not the other way about. God [θεὸν; theon] alone is worthy of supreme seriousness, but man is made god's plaything [θεοῦ τι παίγνιον: *theou ti paignion*], and that is the best part of him. Therefore every man and woman should live life accordingly, and play the noblest games [. . .]. Life must be lived as play, playing certain games, making sacrifices, singing and dancing, and then a man will be able to propitiate the gods, and defend himself against his enemies, and win in the contest.¹³

“Playing . . . games, making sacrifices, singing and dancing”: such acts miss (and even disturb) the rationality applied in our normal (working, economic) life. Yet, these “senseless” acts bring us the closest to the true ground of ourselves and of all that exists: the gods or god.

Huizinga adds that humans *need* such purely playful activities, done for the sake of “fun”, to realize that there is more than scientific rationality, logics, economics, technique, et cetera. Play tears them away from the finite physical world into the direction of the metaphysical infinite. When he quotes the passage at the end of his book, a few lines farther, Huizinga writes:

The human mind can only disengage itself from the magic circle of play by turning towards the ultimate [het allerhoogste]. Logical thinking does not go far enough.¹⁴

Ultimately, play completes modernity's materialistic rationality. That rationality is all too limited since it is restricted to the deterministic laws of physical reality and blocked toward the metaphysical ground.

So, “all is play” does not mean that we are forever cut off from all (metaphysical) ground. On the contrary, countering such idea, Huizinga states that it is the positive answer to the old saying “all is vanity”. “Play” replaces “vanity” by its contrary: it is an affirmation of wisdom. On the last page, we read:

Instead of the old saw: “All is vanity”, the more positive conclusion forces itself upon us that “all is play”. A cheap metaphor, no doubt, mere impotence of the mind; yet it is the wisdom Plato arrived at when he called man the plaything of the gods. In singular imagery the thought comes back again in the Book of Proverbs, where Wisdom says: “The Lord possessed me in the beginning of his ways, before he made anything from the beginning. I was set up from eternity, and of old before the earth was made. I was with him forming all things: and was delighted every day, playing before him at all times; playing in the world. And my delights were to be with the children of men”.¹⁵

So... the *homo ludens* is a Platonist. That is the conclusion popping up on the last pages of Huizinga's book. Just as human *being* in general, human *playing* is inherently oriented toward goodness and truth.

13 Quoted in Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 18–19. See also 211–212.

14 Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 212.

15 Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 212.

Gap as *topos*

It is remarkable— that is the least one can say—that Huizinga considers no other argument needed than the seal of the classic authority named Plato. My hypothesis is that, at the end of his book, the author shies away from the ultimate consequence of his research results. For if “all is play”, does that not mean that nothing can be taken seriously anymore? Does that not finish off any reality claim, any truth claim? Huizinga’s study is an empirical one, searching for the play-element in the wide scope of human culture. The research is successful: play appears to be omnipresent; it dominates the entire culture. But a profound – *philosophical* – question persists. What does it ultimately mean that “all is play”, that even the working of our “mind” is a matter of playing? What does it mean that thinking *as such* plays? So, is truth the result of playing? And is the play theory Huizinga has built up, too, the result of playing?

Let us consider once again how Huizinga defines play. Play is not what delineates culture from nature. Animals play as well. But play, so to speak, *plays* nature. Play takes a distance with respect to nature and does what it does, so to speak “autonomously”, not ruled by nature’s determinist laws. While playing, animals and humans disconnect themselves from the natural functions they nonetheless cannot live without. Cats play with a dead mouse without stilling any hunger. Dancing men and women move their feet just for the sake of moving their feet, just for fun. A gap is created between *life* and *the living of it*. Life is not simply lived, it is *played* – played *as if* it is lived. In that gap, man circles and turns around, does what he does, not for what his doing is meant for, not for its “economic” profit, but for “fun”.

That gap is the *topos* of play, and in that quality, it is the place of representation, imagination, and freedom. Disconnected from the rational, logical embedment in his biological nature, man can do whatever he wants – or, at least, he can want whatever he wants, whether possible or not, and try to adopt his doing to it.

In the gap of that disconnection, the ancient Greek philosophers have located an agency that they called “psyche” or “mind”. To a certain extent, you can consider it the origin of Western thought. Mind/psyche is the name for the human being to the extent he is acting within the space of that gap between life and the living of it. And the psyche’s basic activity is to try to bridge the gap.

This is what, for early Greek philosophy, thinking is. Thinking starts with the impression that it does not match with the whimsical, chaotic reality of everyday life and that it can disconnect from it. That feeling of disconnection goes hand in hand with the appetite to get (re)connected with real, true reality. What happens in the space of that disconnection is what Plato calls “philosophia”: “thinking”, longing for true knowledge, searching for the truth, science.

When he compares it with “playing”, as he does in the passage in *Laws* that Huizinga quotes, it is not in order to define thought as play but, the other way round, play as thought. It might seem as if thought is a play, he explains, but that play is played by “playthings” belonging to the gods, by which he means by real beings, by truth itself. When we play, it is finally truth that is playing. While thinking, it is ultimately truth that does what it does for the sake of just doing it – in other terms, for fun. That is why we ourselves have to play seriously, truthfully. In the religious, metaphysical jargon of the seventeenth century, it would sound: we play our lives and have to play our lives “*pour le bon plaisir de Dieu*”, for God’s fun.

Modern thinking

That Huizinga takes Plato's approach of play for granted is all the more surprising if you realize that the gap mentioned here is precisely the central problem of modern, contemporary thinking. Why Huizinga's *Homo Ludens* was and is still so popular is because it appeals to precisely that problem in the heart of modern thought. Thought is not simply connected to the things it thinks about; we do no longer know the things as they are. Since Kant, knowledge has lost its classic ontological ground; it circles around in the gap between itself and reality, and must be warned to not too easily pretend that it can bridge that gap. That is what, for instance, "gnostic" and other "magic" knowledge does: it takes its "magic circles" for granted all too easily. Knowledge rather must recognize the gap it operates in, and criticize itself when it takes the "magic circles" of its imagination too easily for granted. It must remain alert for the underlying play-dimension of its own activity.

We, moderns, are no longer "the playthings of the gods". The gods are gone. And so has the monotheist, philosophical God as well. Now it is up to us to play, even as the "playthings" we probably still might be. From Huizinga, we have learned that we play and always have played, even in that old serious tradition of philosophy. However, what that basically – philosophically – means, we do not learn from Huizinga's *Homo Ludens*.

Yet, for the philosophy of his time, it was the question of the day. A diversity of epistemological theories was trying to rethink what thinking is, and they all did it by taking the disconnection from reality – the gap in which we "play" life – for granted. They did not think this disconnection on the base of the truth at work in it, which is what Huizinga still did. On the contrary, they tried to think truth on the base of that very gap. First, there is that gap that has to be taken fully for granted; there is that playing for fun in that gap, disconnecting us from truth; and only then, we might consider the possibility of a real, true connection – of a connection to truth.

Here is not the place to give an overview of the different philosophies having tried to realize that aspiration. A few hints must suffice. German idealism was the first attempt to redefine "thinking" from the primacy of that gap. That gap between life and the way it is lived – the gap between reality and the way it is thought – is the very locus of thinking; it is the locus of what Hegel calls "the force of the negative".¹⁶ But, here, that force is still the one of truth. Nietzsche (half a century before Huizinga's *Homo Ludens*) is the first to think that force – that play – as being *not* the one played by truth. That play *invents* truth, which means that truth is a "fable", a fable found out for sad reasons, for reasons of "resentment", of hidden jealousy with respect to those who can live without, or beyond, truth, who can "play" with truth.¹⁷

If thinking is a play with truth and if truth requires an acknowledgment of play as such, then being itself, too, must be considered playing with truth. This is why Georges Bataille, a contemporary of Huizinga and author of a proper play theory as well, considers play as basically "transgressive". If we "play" life, we follow a movement proper to life itself. According to Bataille, life, and being in general, shapes all kinds of "forms",

16 Georg Wilhelm Friedrich 1770-1831 Hegel and Terry P. Pinkard, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, Cambridge Hegel Translations (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

17 Friedrich Nietzsche and Walter Kaufmann, *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*: New York: Random House US, 2010)

but not to behold these forms and to keep them forever as they are. This is the ancient dream of philosophy considering being as that what “is what it is” and so denying being’s *inherent* finitude and mortality.¹⁸

Being is mortal, which for Bataille is the same as saying that being destroys the forms it is realized in. The limits in which it has closed up itself are there to be broken, to be transgressed. That is what we do, for instance, in the erotic games we play as well as in the religious ones. We transgress limits; we “lose ourselves”; we destroy economic results in cults, feasts, festivals, processions, liturgy, animal or human sacrifices, et cetera. All this is a way to “play” true life, to “play” the truth of life, and to acknowledge that the truth we live in is there to be transgressed and destroyed. This is the truth of playing, a truth radically acknowledging the primacy of play.

Structuralism, a dominating social science of the 1950s and ’60s, acknowledged explicitly the gap between the way we live life and life itself. It discovered language as the “matter” that operates in the space of that gap – language seen as the autonomously functioning field of signifiers we share with one another. More generally, structuralism defined “culture” as the field of that mutual sharing (which has the structure of language).¹⁹

And, in a much more ontological way, inspired by antique Stoic logic, Gilles Deleuze conceptualized a proper play theory redefining the very base of what culture, including theory and thinking, is.²⁰ A few more twentieth-century philosophies can be mentioned here, all having in common the aspiration of rethinking what thought is on the base of the primacy of play. Huizinga did not engage in a discussion with such philosophies. Still, it makes his *Homo Ludens* no less interesting, also for the philosophical field of our time. It is up to the philosophies of our day to reread *Homo Ludens* “playfully” and, what amounts to the same thing, to reread their own activity as a “play” and to find out what it means that “all is play”, their own included. In a digital media world full of fake news waves, it is not mere luxury.

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18 Georges 1897-1962. Bataille, *Œuvres complètes / XII Articles 2, 1950-1961*. (Paris: Gallimard, 1988).

19 For a reflection on the relation between Huizinga and structuralism, see, in this issue, the translation of Umberto Eco’s introduction, “*Homo Ludens oggi*” [*Homo Ludens Today*] to the Italian translation of Huizinga’s book (Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*. Torino: Einaudi, 1973).

20 Gilles Deleuze and Constantin V. Boundas, *The Logic of Sense*, European Perspectives (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990).

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