The Value of Play and the Good Human Life

El valor del juego en la vida humana

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Abstract

The dominant conception of play in philosophy of sport is that it is autotelic. This conception is the subject of important criticisms by Stephen Schmid and others. With these criticisms in mind, my paper seeks to move the discussion of play beyond the apparent dichotomy of autotelicity and instrumentality. Drawing a parallel to the role virtue and friendship have in a broadly construed (neo-)Aristotelian ethic, I argue that play is an important part of the good human life. Like virtue and friendship, play is chosen both for the sake of its importance to the good life and for its own sake. It is partly constitutive of the good life and thus chosen as part of and for the sake of the good life. At the same time, however, play is chosen for its own sake: for what it is distinct from any further ends it might bring about. Thus, play is not autotelic, but nor is it instrumental. Play should be considered, therefore, a constituent value of the good human life.

Key words: autotelic, instrumentality, Aristotle, Stephen Schmid, virtue, friendship

Resumen

La concepción dominante del juego en la filosofía del deporte es que éste es autotélico. Esta concepción es objeto de crítica por parte de Stephen Schmid y otros. Teniendo estas críticas en mente, mi artículo busca llevar la discusión acerca del juego más allá de la aparente dicotomía entre autotelicidad e instrumentalidad. Estableciendo una conexión entre el papel que la virtud y la amistad desempeñan en una ética (neo)aristotélica construida ampliamente, defiendo que el juego es una parte importante de la buena vida humana. Como la virtud y la amistad, el juego es elegido tanto por su importancia para la vida buena, como por sí mismo. Éste es en parte constitutivo de la vida buena y, por ello, elegido como motivo y con el fin de lograr la vida buena. Al mismo tiempo, sin embargo, el juego es elegido por sí mismo: por lo que lo hace distinto de otros bienes que pueden resultar de él. Así pues, el juego no es autotélico, pero tampoco instrumental. El juego debe ser considerado, por lo tanto, como un valor constitutivo de la buena vida.

Palabras clave: autotélico, instrumentalidad, Aristóteles, Stephen Schmid, virtud, amistad

Introduction

Play is important. We engage in it for what it is; but play is also valuable because it is part of living a good human life. As such, thinking of it in terms of being either autotelic or instrumental is too limiting. I argue that by looking at the value and role of friendship in the good human life, we can learn something about how we ought to understand the value of play.

First, I will say something about the concept of play and the need to move beyond the dichotomy of autotelicity and instrumentality. Then I will present what I mean by the good human life and how friendship fits into such a life. Lastly, I will explain the analogy to play and why play is a part of the good human life.

Theories of Play

Contemporary theories about play typically start with Johan Huizinga and his classic, *Homo Ludens*. In this influential work, he develops what has become the standard object-account of play. That is, an account of play as an activity with distinct characteristics that mark it as play. This is in contrast to more recent views of play that we can call "attitudinal" (Hyland, 1980; Meier, 1980; Roochnik, 1975). On this view, almost any activity could be play if the player has the appropriate kinds of attitudes towards the activity.

In this article, I do not have the space to do justice to the variety of views on play. But let me briefly highlight, following in part Heather Reid's analysis (Reid, 2012), the main characteristics offered by object-play views and then say a few things about the attitudinal view.

Play is Free/Voluntary

- Play is freely engaged in; it cannot be forced or obligated.
- Play is also an expression of one's freedom. It is a way of feeling free by accepting rules and boundaries or by choosing to start or stop playing.

Play is Extra-ordinary

- Play is a kind of step into another world with its own arbitrary rules and boundaries.
- There is a special time for play; for example, recess or play-time.
- Much of play has its own sense of time:
  - One can spend hours playing without realizing it: You start playing SimCity and hours later you realize it is dark and you have had no dinner.
  - Consider that it takes three hours to play an hour of American Football. Some sports, like baseball, seem to exist outside of time.
- Play often has its own special space. These are sometimes clearly marked as in the boundaries of a playground or a ball field.

Play is Emotionally Satisfying

- An obvious element is that play is something fun or, more broadly, emotionally satisfying. In most cases it is pleasurable and enjoyable; though in some cases it might be about other emotions, like the feeling of pride at overcoming a difficult challenge.

Play is Absorbing

- Related to the freedom, emotional satisfaction, and the extra-ordinary elements of play is the idea that play is absorbing. We are sucked into it, forgetting momentarily about the ordinary world.
- By accepting the conditions of the play-world, one is more likely to be absorbed in the activity. Such experiences are similar to what psychologists discuss as "flow experience." Csikszentmihalyi (1997) describes flow as being linked to activities, such as games, where there are clear goals to achieve and immediate feedback. He goes on to say that for "the duration of the game the player lives in a self-contained universe where everything is black and white" (1997, 29).

Play is Autotelic

- Play is to be engaged for its own sake and not for any external reason or purpose. The play activity is its own justification, meaning, or purpose.
- If one is doing some activity for some other purpose: to earn money, to learn a skill, to get famous, then one is not really playing.
  - Paraphrasing Bernard Suits (1977) in "Words On Play": if some activity has a usefulness for some other purpose external to play, then it really is not play at all.

Attitudinal View

The attitudinal theories of play claim that we cannot define play as a kind of activity with distinct characteristics. Play is more about the attitude or stance of the player, not the activity itself. For example, Drew Hyland (1980) describes play as "responsive openness." Openness is the heightened awareness of

one's situation. Responsiveness is the willingness to respond, appropriately, to what one is aware of in the situation. In playing chess, one is open by being acutely aware of the location of all the pieces on the board, their potential moves, and the time one has to move. One is responsive by responding to the opponent's move of her bishop into a check of one's king by moving the rook to block check. So one is playing when one has the appropriate open and responsive attitude to the activity. Similarly, David Roochnik (1975) describes play as a stance that involves an attitude of engagement with and immersion in an activity.

On these views, any activity can be play if the individual has the appropriate attitudes towards and about the activity. There are important differences between the object and attitudinal views, but for the purposes of the analysis here, the differences are not essential and can be ignored.

Autotelicity

Both the object and attitudinal views of play incorporate the idea that play is autotelic. In his definition of play, Huizinga says it has "its aim in itself" (1950, 28). Caillois says "Play is an end in itself" (2001, 167). Suits (1977) defines all play as necessarily autotelic. For Klaus Meier's attitudinal view, "play is an autotelic activity…an intrinsic, noninstrumental, self-contained enterprise" (1980, 25). Though Hyland's stance view of play (1980) does not directly address the issue of autotelicity, he sees responsive openness as something inherently and intrinsically valuable in itself.

But is the idea of autotelicity consistent? Is it necessary for a conception of play? In two papers in the *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport*, Stephen Schmid replies no to both of these questions. His account provides persuasive reasons for thinking that autotelicity is not helpful in understanding play and that we need to "reject the definition of play as an autotelic activity and redefine play" (2011, 157). There is much more to his analysis and criticism of autotelicity than I can cover here, but I will point to two of his reasons for rejecting play as autotelic.

First, autotelicity is a vaguer and more obscure notion than play is, thus defining play in terms of autotelicity does not help our understanding of play. Schmid says that it "does no good to offer an account of the nature of play by appealing to another concept, autotelicity, which is even more opaque because it conflates several different concepts into one" (2011, 155). That is, by giving an account of play that appeals to a concept that is more obscure than the concept of play, we do not gain a better or clearer idea of play.

To understand this claim, we need to look at the ways that autotelicity gets conflated and is thus opaque. Schmid argues that there are at least three ways the philosophy of sport literature treats autotelicity: "an activity as an end in itself, an agent's valuing of the activity, and an agent's reasons" (2009, 240). We can use autotelic to refer to the activity itself as being its own end (Schmid's Metaphysical Account): there is "some property or properties inherent in the activity which makes the activity an end in itself" (242).This is distinct from the agent's attitude about the activity. This second sense of autotelic, what Schmid calls the Intrinsically Valued Account, refers to the manner in which the agent takes the activity as valuable for its own sake and not as a means to some other end. Lastly, Schmid explains how autotelicity is also used to refer to the kind of motivating reasons one has for playing: the Intrinsic Reasons Account. Play is an activity best understand by appealing to the kinds of intrinsically motivating reasons one has for the activity.

Schmid explains that these are not equivalent conceptions and they are often conflated (2009, 254). Moreover, they are not equally plausible. In particular, he rejects the Metaphysical Account because there is no obvious way to identify the set of properties of an activity that make it an end-in-itself. Moreover, the attempts to identify these properties typically reduce the account to one of the other notions of autotelicity (243). Of the Intrinsically Value Account, Schmid says either it begs the question by defining the activity as being "intrinsically valuable because it is intrinsically valuable" or it shifts the value away from the activity and towards some desired psychologically state (243-44).

Schmid endorses the Intrinsic Reasons Account as the best explanation of play, but argues that we can make sense of these reasons motivating play without appealing to autotelicity. He argues that autotelicity is not sufficiently robust or dynamic enough of a concept to capture the complexity of human motivation and reason for play (2011, 155-57). He concludes that we can make better sense of these motivations and reasons by grounding them in the "psychological needs of the human agent" (163).

If Schmid is right, then the usage of autotelicity is too varied and inconsistent to help clarify play. This is not to say that autotelicity is nonsensical or without value; it indicates mainly that because the accounts are not consistent, autotelicity will not get us very far in understanding play. Because of this, Schmid's analysis shows that further inquiry into autotelicity

as a defining characteristic of play is unlikely to yield greater clarity about autotelicity or aid in our understanding of play.

Second, the main ways we can make sense of autotelicity seem to leave us without any genuine instances of play. This is most clearly seen in Suits' account. Suits tells us that to be genuine, real play we can have no other purpose, goal, end, or intention in play other than play. Schmid points out that given the realities of human psychology and experience, this leaves genuine play as an empty concept (2011, 154-55).

Randolph Feezell also provides reasons for moving beyond autotelicity. In "A Pluralist Conception of Play," Feezell argues that we have to acknowledge the variety of meanings and usages of play when we theorize about it (2010, 162). This pluralistic account of play does not necessarily exclude autotelicity, but it allows for conceptions of play that make little or no use of an appeal to autotelicity. This indicates that autotelicity is not necessary for a conception of play.

One likely reason that the play as autotelic persists so widely is the worry that if play is not autotelic, then it must be merely instrumentally valuable. If so, would this drain play of its importance and value? Would it become merely another tool; just another thing we have to do?

This is a mistake; a mistake based on the false dichotomy of value either being autotelic or instrumental. It leaves out a third possible conception of value.

This possibility is nothing new or innovative; it goes back to at least Aristotle's conception of value in his view of the good human life (Ackrill, 1980, 19). In what follows, I want to make use of broadly Aristotelian conceptions of the good human life and value to understand how play can move beyond the false dichotomy of autotelicity and instrumentality.

The Good Human Life

The good human life–the life well lived, eudaimonia, flourishing–is a human life that is, relative to one's circumstances, successful, happy, and satisfying (Hursthouse, 1999, 10). It is a life of excellent and successful practical activity (Broadie, 1991, 41).

To live such a life, requires, first understanding what kinds of beings human beings are. We need to understand what our capacities and limitations are; what kinds of things are naturally satisfying and what kinds of things we actually are capable of. Second, we need to figure out, given the kind of beings we are, the principles that will structure and guide the choices, actions, and activities that constitute the good human life. We have to discover and then guide our lives by a set of principles, virtues, and practices that will make us more capable of living such a life.

According to this view, what each of us is trying to do is to live such a life. Although our conceptions about the specifics of such a life and how to live it can and do differ markedly, the neo-Aristotelian views are sufficiently inclusive and pluralistic to account for a wide range of particular conceptions of the good human life (Ackrill, 1980, 17; Hursthouse, 1999, 8-10;). Nevertheless, such a life contains general features. I want to focus on three such features that I think are the most relevant to the discussion here.

One of the central features of the good human life is that it is self-directed. John Cooper describes Aristotle's view of eudaimonia "as necessarily the result of a person's own efforts" (Cooper, 1986, 124). The good human life is not the same as being fortunate or lucky–though there is some role for these. The good human life is a way of living that is initiated and guided by one's own knowledge, habits, and choices: a "person's role in bringing it about that his desires are satisfied or his aims attained is of fundamental importance" (Whiting, 1988, 43). Accordingly, for the life to be good for the person living it, the person needs to be directing it: at the heart of the good human life is the exercise of one's rational agency (Broadie, 1991, 48).

A closely connected idea is that the good human life is not a generic abstract thing: it is a life lived by a particular individual. There are generic goods and ends that the individual ought to desire or needs to pursue, but to contribute to the good life these goods and ends need to be individualized.

Douglas Rasmussen and Douglas Den Uyl, in defending their view of a neo-Aristotelian ethic, tell us "Human flourishing achieves determinacy and reality only when the generic goods and virtues find expression through the individual's unique talents, potentialities, and circumstances" (2016, 41). Each person, through his or her own agency, needs to discover, given the particularities of his or her circumstances and capabilities, how to bring those generic goods and ends into reality.

The last general feature of the good human life to bring into focus here is that that good human life is lived with people. Human beings are naturally social animals (Aristotle, 1984, 37). We are born into a world intertwined with others. We depend on others as we grow and mature. And as adults, as Aristotle's view of friendship makes clear, our flourishing consists in being with and loving others.

CCD 38 ▮ AÑO 14 ▮ VOLUMEN 13 ▮ MURCIA 2018 ▮ PÁG. 119 A 125 ▮ ISSN: 1696-5043

As a generic claim about human life, sociality does not necessarily imply any particular kinds of social relationships, communities, or obligations. It is just the claim that part of living the good human life is that one does so with and amongst others.

There are other general, common features of the good human life, but these, self-directedness, individuation, and sociality, are sufficient for the argument made here.

Value

The good human life is an end-in-itself; its value does not derive from what it does or what it brings about. As Aristotle put it, it is chosen for its own sake and not for anything beyond it (1985, 13). In this way, the good human life is the final or ultimate end. Thus, all other values and ends are such because of eudaimonia.

From this, however, we should not conclude that all other actions, activities, and practices are merely instrumental towards eudaimonia; that their value derives solely in terms of bringing about or leading to eudaimonia (Ackrill, 1980, 21; Broadie, 1991, 27). For example, the various moral and intellectual virtues are not to be understand as instrumental towards the good life. According to Aristotle, for an action to be in accordance with virtue it must be chosen for its own sake (1985, 40). Thus, virtue is not an instrumental value.

Nevertheless, the virtues are identified, developed, and exercised because of their role in living the good human life. It is the successful exercise of virtue that is part of what it means to be living the good human life. Therefore, they are not purely ends-in-themselves, since, in part, we choose them for the sake of the good human life (Broadie, 1991, 27-28; 30-31).

We can see that the virtues occupy a third space in our conception of value. There are things that have value because of what they help to bring about; these are the instrumental values. We engage in and value these activities precisely, and in many cases solely, because they bring about something else we value.

And there are things that are valuable solely in themselves: they are ends-in-themselves and are not done, pursued, engaged in for purposes or values beyond themselves. This is, I would argue, a set of one: the good human life is the only genuine and complete end-in-itself. This would also mean that autotelicity only makes sense when applied to a life as whole and not to the components of a life. Although I think this is the best way to understand the neo-Aristotelian view of the good human life and ends-in-themselves, the argument here does not depend on the good human life being the only end-in-itself (or the only referent for autotelicity)–just that it is an end-in-itself.

Lastly, there is this third category: the activities and practices we value in their own right, but also because of how they contribute to and constitute the good human life (Ackrill, 1980, 19; Broadie, 1991, 27-28; 30-31). These values are neither instrumental, nor ends-in-themselves; they are constitutive of the good life.

Consider that we do not swing a baseball bat in order to play baseball. The swinging does not bring about or cause the playing of baseball; it is not merely instrumental to baseball. The swinging of the bat, however, partially constitutes the playing of baseball. That is part of what it is to be playing baseball.

So to carry the analogy forward, the virtues are not developed and exercised just in order to bring about the good life. They are not instrumental. The exercising of virtues is partly just what it is to be living the good life; they partially constitute such a life.

Friendship is not a virtue as such, but friendship is related to the good human life in a way similar to the virtues. And its relationship to the good life provides a useful analogy for seeing the role play has in such a life.

Friendship

Like virtue, friendship is a constitutive good: good friends are something that are partially constitutive of the good life. That is, having friends share one's life is part of what it is to be living a good life (Aristotle, 1985, 207). As such, friendship is both something valuable in-itself, but also valued because it is part of the good human life.

We know that having friends is important for mental health. Friends help us cope with adversity. Friends offer us the opportunity for psychological visibility. At the same time, these benefits do not explain–fully or primarily–why I am friends with Joe.

Joe and I are friends because of the specific and individual values we share and enjoy together. We choose to spend time together because we want to be in each other's company. We lend an ear when the other needs to vent or share good news because we care about each other.

When I think about my friendship with Joe, I do not think of the general benefits of friendship, I think of the specific values embodied by my friend. The value of friendship, from this perspective, is the concrete, individual person. At this level, I value Joe and our friendship for its own sake; in this way it feels like an end-in-itself.

But, from the perspective of thinking about the kind of lives we ought to lead, we recognize that friendship is a way of being with other people that is important for living the good human life. We focus on the general benefits of friendship and how these contribute to living a better life. We see, as Aristotle tells us, that not only are friends necessary for the good life, they are one of the greatest goods we can have (1985, 257).

We can also see how friendship is an important part of living the good human life by how it helps instantiate the generic features of the good human life: self-directedness, individuation, and sociality.

Friendships are inherently social and as such they are the main way we express and experience human sociality.

As illustrated by my friendship with Joe: friendships have to be individualized. When two people are friends: it is the particular individuals that share the love and well-wishing that constitutes friendship. It is not a generic abstract connection between idealized forms: it is a particular individualized connection in time and place.

Lastly, friendships are initiated, developed, and maintained only by the efforts of the friends. From the more casual of friendships to the most intimate, romantic relationships, a healthy, sustainable relationship takes effort; it takes the self-directed agency of each party to the relationship.

Such relationships, then, are an essential way by which we live good lives because, in part, they embody key elements of such a life. Friendships allow us to experience directly and consciously the experience of living a good human life while exercising the capacities that make such a life possible.

Play

Now let us turn to play. Earlier, I presented the main characteristics of play: an activity or attitude towards an activity that is: voluntary, extra-ordinary, emotionally satisfying, absorbing, and autotelic.

Following Schmid, I want to put aside autotelicity as a main characteristic of play. Nevertheless, there is something intuitive about the in-itself-ness of play that needs to be explained.

Play is engaged in and accepted for the sake of the existence of the play-activity; we accept the conditions of the play-world in order to play. For the player playing, this feels like the activity is its own end. Yet, there are reasons for which we want to play. That is, we accept the conditions of the play-world in order to play (and so it feels like an end-in-itself); but we choose to play, in part, for its role in our lives and for what it does for us (and so it is not autotelic).

Like friendship and virtue, play is a kind of value that is chosen for its own sake but is at the same time chosen because it partially constitutes the good life. And, like friendship, we can see how play is important for living the good human life by looking at how it expresses the generic characteristics of the good human life.

Nearly all theories of play point to the voluntariness of play as essential. It is freely entered into; the play-world and its conditions are willingly accepted. David Roochnik (1975) and Drew Hyland (1980) both present play as a way or manner of directing one's self towards the world. In Schmid's account, the intrinsic reasons we have for playing are deeply tied to autonomously directed behaviors (2011, 158-63).

Play is a special way by which we can experience and express self-directedness. By choosing to play and orient ourselves towards an activity in a playful way, we are expressing and experiencing our own agency directly. With our careers or our close relationships, our agency is spread out of over years and so it is hard to experience their self-directedness in a concrete way. But in play, since it is relatively brief and requires our explicit acceptance, we can repeatedly and immediately experience the self-directed nature of lives.

Play is also highly individualized. I like Sudoku; others hate it. Many choose sport or related activities as their play; others would rather play Settlers of Catan or Minecraft. What we choose to play is a way for us to express our particular identities and values.

John Cooper, in discussing the role of friendship in Aristotle's concept of human flourishing, points out that flourishing "requires self-knowledge and conscious self-affirmation" (Cooper, 1980, 321). Flourishing, in part, requires that we know that the life we are living is good and friends help us see that about ourselves in a more objective and direct way. That is part of their value in the good human life.

Play also allows us to experience what we value, what we are good at, and what we are weak at. By choosing what to play, we can express and identify our values. By how successful we are in our play, we can learn about our abilities and capacities, and how to improve them. In these ways, play is an important way not just to express and craft our individuality, but to experience it more directly.

Lastly, like friendship, play is one of the main ways we express and experience our sociality. Unlike friendship, play is not inherently or necessarily social. We can and do play by ourselves in fruitful and rewarding ways; nevertheless, many forms of play require others. Even solitaire games can be experienced in a social manner:

CCD 38 ▮ AÑO 14 ▮ VOLUMEN 13 ▮ MURCIA 2018 ▮ PÁG. 119 A 125 ▮ ISSN: 1696-5043

as evidenced by the spread of many of these games into social media. Though it is not necessary, as social beings playing with others is often experienced as more rewarding and satisfying than solitary play.

So play, like friendship, is a part of the way we live good lives because, in part, it embodies key elements of living such a life. Playing, like friendship, allows us to experience directly and consciously the experience of living a good human life while exercising the capacities that make such a life possible.

The good human life is one of excellent and successful practical activity. What this means at the level of our lives is abstract: it is hard to conceptualize what such a life is except in fairly general and abstract terms. But play is a way to experience, in miniature, such a life. It is not that playing a game of solitaire or soccer is itself living the good human life; but it is a way of experiencing in a concrete and direct way a moment of excellent and successful practical activity; and this allows us to have a more direct and immediate experience of living the good human life.

Conclusion

The dichotomy of autotelicity and instrumentality is too limiting to show us the real value of play. Like friendships and the virtues, the value of play is constitutive. Play is an activity we value, on one hand, in terms of the particular experience of play we have; and at the same time, it is valued as a constitutive part of living the good human life.

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