Play as Self-Realization
Toward a General Theory of Play

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In a wide-ranging essay that reviews the major theories of plays and relates them to significant notions of the self, the author addresses the question of why we play. He does so to argue that play is a biologically driven project of self-understanding and self-realization, one that humans—although they also share the experience with other creatures—have developed most fully as a part of their psychological and social life. **Key words**: play and self-realization; rhetorics of play; theories of play

In 1973 psychologist Michael Ellis wrote a book called *Why People Play* in which he addressed that very issue. Like other compendia of play theory before and since, Ellis's summaries manifest the view that there are many ways of thinking about play and many explanations for why it occurs (Millar 1968; Levy 1978; Spariosu 1989; Sutton-Smith 1997; Power 2005; Burghardt 2005; Carlisle 2009). Ellis's book focuses on this multiplicity of approaches before attempting to make them mesh in a few pages at the end.

Here, I hope to extend the integration of disparate approaches to play. My thesis is that play can be understood as a project of self-realization, a project humans share with other creatures who play. To develop my thesis effectively, I need first to present a vision of self expansive enough to accommodate various theories of play. I can then discuss the notion of realization in a way that shows how play constitutes a specific strategy for aligning orientations and actions. Play, I—like some others—argue, is a fundamental way creatures make coherent their possibilities for acting in the world. To begin, let me return to the theories of Ellis and the other commentators on play.

Play Theory: A Brief Summary

Ellis starts with a remembrance of some classic theories of play from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Like scholars of every age, those who

produced such theories shared the fascinations of their times. They appreciated Charles Darwin and his ideas about the shared ancestries of living creatures and the ways differences emerged among species. These scholars linked their notions of biological development—at both the individual and species levels—to ideas about social and cultural development and focused especially on the new industrial societies then arising. Scholars pondered the mechanisms of stability and change, the prospect that history can be conceived as progress, and the energy needed to carry all these processes forward.

In this context, some of the classic theorists claimed that play is an expression of surplus energy (Spencer 1896), a practicing of the instincts (Groos 1898), or a pattern of relaxation from the pressures of an industrial civilization (Patrick 1916). Others maintained the quite different (and, indeed, opposite) view that play is a form of energy restoration or re-creation (Lazarus 1883). Different, too, were the scholars who described play as a sort of recapitulation—in individual development—of earlier stages in the evolution of the species (Hall 1906). Taken as a whole, these classic explanations claim that play not only illustrates individuals' connections to their animal heritage but also connotes their distinctive abilities as a species. In other words, play links us to what has gone before (and to our basic frameworks for acting-in-the-world) at the same time that it frees us from the grip of instinct and manufactures new possibilities of living.

During the twentieth century, scholars tried to specify more clearly the psychological and physiological processes inherent to play. They gave special attention to the conditions preceding the play moment. For example, some scholars like Menninger (1960) argued that play is a form of catharsis, a purging of undesired feelings and tensions by expressive action within socially approved formats. This thesis, related to energy build-up and discharge, owes much to Sigmund Freud and, before him, to Aristotle. Freud (1967) himself altered his original view of play as a form of wish fulfillment and pleasure seeking with a claim that play is also a pattern of ego mastery, a control of libidinal desires that becomes a source of pleasure in its own right. Erik Erikson (1963), Freud's pupil and revisionist, pushed forward this theory that humans strive to develop capacities for personal coordination and control. Stated most broadly, play is a vehicle for personal development.

Jean Piaget (1962), himself a student of another one of Freud's followers Carl Jung, articulated most clearly the general idea presented here, that play is essentially a quest for cognitive consistency. Piaget identifies play as "pure assimilation," the attempt of children to make the world's processes submit to

cognitively based schemes. People play to experience the pleasure that comes from imposing their own behavioral strategies on the world. As they play, they practice forms of bodily and psychic control. The claim that players are preoccupied with building and reinforcing symbolically based rules and regimes also became central to Piaget's (1966) theory of moral development through games.

Later interpreters have modified these views. For example, Jerome Bruner (1986) argued that play is less a search for conceptual order and clarity than it is a much looser style of narrative expression that features image-based thinking and multiple interpretations. Greta Fein (1981) stressed the role of pretense in play as a process that helps children use de-contextualized knowledge, make object substitutions, assume new roles, and distinguish self from the other. Donald Winnicott (1986) helped move psychoanalytic discourse from concerns with deep instinctual urges to consideration of the tensions raised by contemporary interpersonal relationships. In this light, play—including the activity of play therapy—lives in the space between its participants. Play's materiality also helps children distinguish imaginative activity in the world from private fantasy. Russell Meares (2005) took a similar approach, stressing that play is an effective means to build the self, especially as a means of negotiating the relationship of aloneness to togetherness through dialectical participation with others. Terry Marks-Tarlow (2010) extended such ideas even further, linking the therapeutic tradition with themes from poststructural thought and nonlinear science. Seen in this light, play seems an expressive opportunity for the fractal self.

In contrast to Piaget's cognitive and moral emphasis, some scholars thought play intimately related to feelings of arousal and tension, allowing for the management of these feelings in protected forms of activity. In a modification of behaviorist theory, some scholars (Berlyne 1966) argued that creatures typically seek some optimal balance between security (which, in extremes, can be boring) and stimulation (which, when magnified, produces anxiety). Animals that play, or so the thinking goes, have developed an orienting reflex that allows them to pursue sources of stimulation and to monitor their relationship to those stimuli. Play behaviors are practices in that seeking and monitoring process. This general approach, that players seek out and enjoy appropriately stimulating or challenging situations, was later extended by psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1991) in his descriptions of "flow."

At one level then, play, at least in Ellis's (1973, 107) view, is "a word we use to categorize behaviors that elevate arousal." However, it is also the case that creatures try to assure themselves they are in control of those arousal-seeking

processes, something White (1959) called competence-effectance training. In short, creatures try to position themselves within a protected occasion that contains both familiar and unfamiliar elements and that possesses problems or challenges they consider intriguing or significant. In this light, play activities seem self-motivated attempts to create and solve problems.

Anthropologist John Roberts and a number of colleagues took a similar approach named "conflict-enculturation theory" (Roberts, Arth, and Bush 1959; Roberts and Sutton-Smith 1962). They understand the game forms most favored by particular societies as devices that allow players to address and respond to some of the challenges, tensions, or conflicts generated by the social structures of those societies. This theory applies especially to the tensions created by different patterns of child rearing. In essence, people respond to culturally induced problems through culturally approved procedures.

Play as a form of problem solving also proves central to the work of some of the great educational reformers. One of these, Friedrich Froebel, envisioned play as an opportunity to counter the bureaucratic tendencies associated with industrialization (Provenzo 2009). When children play, they partake of the harmonies of the natural world. Froebel's educational approach, which features his so-called gifts and occupations, encourages children to engage in self-directed manipulations of the material world. In doing so, they join scientific knowledge with aesthetic experience. Maria Montessori advocated a more practical approach. Her famous method encourages children to play with elements that have implications for adult life, such as toy hammers, dishes, and ovens. Children, she argues, desire self-guided activity with culturally valued items instead of fantasy-based role play (Montessori 1992). Children also enjoy the social validation that comes from sharing their activities with peers. Instrumental (or work-like) activity also serves a role in philosopher and educator John Dewey's theories. Dewey (1910) believed the value of work, however, often is undermined by external incentives that turn it into drudgery. Instead, children should be motivated by a playful spirit, which commits them to the inherent value of what they are doing and excites their creativity.

In common, these educational theorists emphasize the value of play—or at least the playful spirit—as something that builds the person, not only through the development of experience-based skills and knowledge but also by habits of self-directed inquiry. I should note that later educational thinkers such as Vivian Paley (2005) have stressed the value of fantasy or make-believe play. When children assume unusual or exotic roles (such as monsters, pets, and super

heroes), they engage in the most complicated forms of cultural imagination and social dialogue—developing the communication skills that are necessary for living in any society. This emphasis on imaginative thinking has also been championed by psychologists Jerome and Dorothy Singer (2005) who emphasize the appropriate role for adults in nurturing and responding to child fantasy. So understood, play is not a flight from the world: it is inquiry into the challenges and responsibilities of social living.

Although these educational and psychological scholars were aware of the implications of play for creating worthy societies, I think it fair to say that most accounts of play have stressed (and continue to stress) its individual meanings, both as causes and consequences. However, the degree to which social and cultural factors channel expressive activity has been a theme of many historians, sociologists, and anthropologists (Henricks 2006). Two of the greatest of these were Johan Huizinga and Roger Caillois. Huizinga (1955) argued that play (and especially the socially competitive form of play he called the agon) is the vehicle by which people publicly display their character, capabilities, and status, not only as individuals but as communities. In play, people envision and enact the possibilities of living in their societies; and for that reason, play is an important agency of social and cultural change. For his part, Caillois (2001) identified other versions of play beyond the agon (such as those based on chance, role play, and the pursuit of turbulence or vertigo). He also articulated the differences between the more artificially constrained forms of play (ludus) and its freer versions (paidia). Furthermore, Caillois attempted to connect these differences in play preferences to the social characteristics of societies.

As I have noted, many contemporary studies build on well-established traditions of research. However, new approaches, consistent with wider philosophical and scientific shifts, have also emerged. Some studies of play express the commitments of poststructural and postmodern thought (Hans 1981; Spariosu 1989; Kuchler 1994). These studies emphasize the extent to which human beings are *not* bound by firm social, cultural, or even physical structures. Rather, they believe the human condition should be more aptly conceived as the ever-changing intersection of many kinds of occurrences. For them, the universe itself is "at play," and people themselves are "in play" as they move from one eventful moment to the next. They use ideas of a de-centered world, change, randomness, particularity, cultural and social diversity, conflict, and ambiguity to argue that playfulness is perhaps the most appropriate response to contemporary circumstances.

A more moderate version of this tradition follows the thinking of the Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky. Vygotsky (1978) focused on experience—and on play—as a dialogue between differently situated individuals who both cooperate and challenge one another. This play becomes a kind of performance, an acting out of imaginative possibilities before audiences who not only critically evaluate but also contribute to an unfolding scenario that has neither clear beginnings nor ends (Lobman and O'Neill 2011). In other words, play expresses people's commitment to make and inhabit a new world. It is something we improvise together.

Technical advances have also made possible more detailed forms of scientific scrutiny. Some contemporary studies now focus on the biochemical foundations of playful behavior. For example, neuroscientist Jaak Panksepp (2004) has described the relationship between play and the brain's neural pathways. Although play, like other behaviors, depends on some deeply established pathways that make possible basic kinds of feeling and behaving, play also helps the brain consolidate (and prune) pathways arising from experience. Other researchers (LeDoux 1996; Vanderschuren 2010) have attempted to identify the role of brain chemicals in motivating and rewarding behavior (through feelings of arousal and pleasure). Sometimes these researchers use knowledge developed through experiments on other animal species (Pellis, Pellis, and Bell 2010). Furthermore, those who study animal behavior, in both zoos and wild spaces, describe the connections between animal and human play (Fagen 1981; Burghardt 2005). Species vary in their tendencies to play, their forms of play, and in the degree to which their playfulness extends through the life cycle.

In this context, Gordon Burghardt advocates a multicausal theory of play, one which features different kinds of conditions that facilitate or afford the behavior in question. For Burghardt, play is most likely to occur: (1) when there is sufficient "metabolic energy" for such activity, (2) when "animals are buffered from serious stress and food shortages," (3) when there is "stimulation to elicit species-typical behavioral systems or to reach an optimal level of arousal," and (4) when there is "a lifestyle that involves a complex sequence of behavior in varying conditions" (2005, 172). Warm-blooded, mobile species like mammals and birds (which require periods of parental care and form social bonds) are the most likely to exhibit the behaviors we call play.

Although my descriptions of different play theories are fairly brief, I think my point is clear enough: play takes many forms. Many species play. The animals of some species play only when they are young; others extend their play

for a lifetime. Some play behaviors are more ritualistic or rule bound (ludus); other expressions are more spontaneous or improvisational (paidia). Some play appears constructive in spirit; other forms seem rebellious or disorderly (Henricks 2009a). Also, the objects and settings of play vary dramatically. Some play is culturally focused (Huizinga); some emphasizes social communication (Vygotsky); other forms are focused on psychological concerns and imaginings (Freud). Almost always, play involves bodily activity—sounds, gestures, movements, and the like (Groos). Those movements occur in physical environments that both enable the activity and provide forms of resistance (Burghardt). Most play theorists emphasize play behaviors that express and respond to some very fundamental patterns important for individual functioning. But as the postmodernists (and the arousal theorists) insist, play is also fostered by conditions that are ambiguous, novel, and changing. On the one hand then, play is an exercising and refining of the familiar; on the other, play celebrates the unpredictable and surprising.

In a book that emphasizes this diversity of experience—and the multiple meanings that can be attached to play—Brian Sutton-Smith (1997) argues that there are seven different explanatory rhetorics that scholars have used to account for play. These are development or progress, the self, the imaginary, competition or power, community identity, the fascination with fate, and finally, frivolity and foolishness. Some of these approaches (progress, self, and the imaginary) are favored by scholars who focus on modern societies. Scholars who embrace older or tradition-based societies—and this includes some postmodern writers who hearken to premodern values—emphasize the other four rhetorics: fate, power, community identity, and frivolity. For his part, Sutton-Smith (like Ellis before him) argues that play is connected to a search for variability in thought, feeling, and behavior by members of a species and that the development of this variability promotes the survival of those individuals when confronted with new or difficult circumstances. Sutton-Smith argues more generally, however, that play defies one-factor explanations. As his book title makes plain, play is ambiguous.

Understanding the Self

In this article, I advance the thesis that play behaviors express an even more general quest than I have just described. The focus of this quest I call self-realization. On the one hand, my claim supports the view that creatures seek

(and benefit from) encounters with the world that are stimulating, novel, exciting, or otherwise arousing. We expand and thicken the range of our capabilities by seeking novel conditions and by varying our responses to them. Play is not just an attempt to diversify, however. When we play, we also seek feelings of control, security, and mastery—that is to say, the very experiences that are emphasized by Piaget, Freud, and Erikson. Play helps us select and solidify some behavioral strategies, so that we may use them quickly and easily.

But is play only a practicing of skills, a getting better at the activity of living? How does such an explanation jibe with Sutton-Smith's claim that play is also about the pleasures of communal bonding, willful foolishness, fascination with the fall of the dice, the chance to assert power over someone who resists you, or the perplexities of self-experience? Surely we learn things other than skills when we play. Just as surely, play is less a development of work-like skills than an activity aimed at experiencing fun. People seek out the distinctive encounters we call play with the anticipation that they will be rewarded with a succession of positive emotions. So what is a player's true ambition? My answer is that creatures who play seek to acquaint themselves with the character of the world in which they operate and to evaluate the personal standings they can achieve within that world. I will develop this broad sense of personal connections, capabilities, and commitments as the notion of "self" in the next section of this article.

I should state at once that the idea proposed here, that play has something to do with the cultivation of selfhood, is not especially striking or new. As we have seen, themes of self are one—but only one—of Sutton-Smith's seven rhetorics. As he explains (Sutton-Smith 1997), academic interest in the self is often connected to a romanticized vision of individualism that stresses subjectively envisioned freedom, intrinsic motivation, and distinctive (sometimes extreme) experiences. Play is about ecstatic performance, or flow (Csikszenmihalyi 1991) and just plain fun. Furthermore, discourses about the nature and implications of the self are far from simple affairs. There is, to be sure, the modernist vision of the self as the firmly bound individual who resists external influences and guides his own affairs. But other ages—and other, non-Western societies—have their own versions of selfhood. Traditional societies have selves deeply embedded in group relations; postmodernists celebrate the cagey consumerist self who abandons stability for an easeful gilding through ever-changing circumstances. Self-experience for children differs from that for adults. Different genders, social classes, ethnic groups, and generations come to somewhat different conclusions about who they are and what their possibilities for living may be. To

summarize, we experience and express selfhood—like play itself—in many ways.

The many aspects and implications of selfhood are also reflected in the continued outpouring of books and articles devoted to this topic in the humanities and social sciences (Baumeister 1999; Seiger 2005; Branaman 2007). I would argue that this profusion of commentaries attests to the centrality of the idea of self for understanding the human predicament. Although I will not attempt to summarize this vast body of research here, I do wish to identify some of the issues that inform the themes of these studies of self. Fortunately, many of these themes appear in what perhaps remains the greatest treatment of self in the social sciences, William James's analysis of this subject in his *Principles of Psychology*, first published in 1890.

James (1952, 188) defines the self as "... *In its widest possible sense,* however, *a man's Self is the sum total of all that he CAN call his,* not only his body and his psychic powers, but his clothes and his house, his wife and children, his ancestors and friends, his reputation and works, his lands and horses, and yacht and bank-account" [italics his]. Contemporary readers will notice—and perhaps be offended by—some nineteenth-century trappings. James's self is of the modernist acquisitive sort, a person who defines himself through his attachments and his possessions. And, of course, James's example is laden with patriarchal and class-ridden imagery. I note these deficiencies in part because understandings of self are indeed almost always historically based. Still, James directs our attention to several issues that continue to engage academics.

Perhaps the first of these issues concerns whether the self should be seen as a way for individuals to understand themselves (that is, how I think about myself) or as a pattern of connections to the world (my set of attachments). For James, both of these views are pertinent. Individuals do understand themselves—and even distinguish themselves as different from other people—by their various traits and affiliations. However, these connections are not simply ideas in someone's mind; rather the self is "empirically" based. That is to say, all of us have "real" bodies, possessions, friends, families, and other entities that channel our possibilities as persons. Simultaneously, we are connected to the world and engage in acts of reflection about those connections.

What are those connections? For James, there are four principal fields of self-involvement. In the first instance, selves are "embodied." We are physical organisms who operate in the world as bodies and who consider these bodies to be extensions of who we are. In some cultures, control of one's own body is one of the prerogatives of adulthood (Foucault 1977; Williams and Bendelow 1998).

Second, selves are expressed and solidified through material possessions—our houses, bank accounts, and yachts to use James's images. Theft of a highly valued object may be felt as a violation to our person. A third focus of the self is other people and groups, that is, our social connections. Indeed, James goes so far as to say that "*a man has as many social selves as there are individuals who recognize him* and carry an image of him in their mind" [italics his] (1952, 189–90). Fourth and finally, James emphasizes what he calls the psychological or "spiritual" self. All of us, he points out, think or ourselves as possessing qualities of character and mental capability and (perhaps more profoundly) of our being possessed by these self-qualities. Our individual feats of consciousness are made possible by the general frameworks of mentality.

To James's four-fold scheme I would add one more field of self-experience. As anthropologists have long emphasized and as postmodernists have declared more recently, humans also live inside culture and comprehend themselves by their relationship to its elements. Culture, at least as I define it (Henricks 2012), is the patterning of publicly accessible resources—both symbolic and material—that facilitate thought, feeling, and behavior. Most of us position ourselves concerning particular publicly recognized skills, political and religious beliefs, and areas of specialized knowledge. As we direct our daily activities and attempt to communicate our experiences and intentions to others, we come to terms with these cultural resources. In these five ways then—body, material environment, psyche, society, and culture—the self is grounded.

Up to this point, I have argued that selfhood is experienced as one's connections to the different kinds of world elements described in this article. But are not there different patterns of connection to these elements? That is, comprehending the self means comprehending one's relationship or standing before otherness. As we have seen, that sense of otherness may focus on bodily urges, a poem we are reading, the demands of a friend, our own psychological preoccupations, or a ball that comes hurtling toward us. Sometimes, we seem to be in charge or control of the element we are dealing with (a position I call privilege), at other times, we experience the opposite condition (subordination). Different again is the experience of more balanced and intensive reciprocity (the give-and-take I term engagement). Finally, there is the pattern of more distant, if reciprocal regarding (what I call marginality). Each of these is a quite distinct platform of possibility and will be addressed further in the section on play (Henricks 2010).

Is self a process of ongoing subjective involvement in the world, or it is a more stable—even objective—pattern that anchors and directs the involve-

ment? In response to this question, James would present his famous distinction between the "I" and the "me." With regard to the first of these terms, selfhood must be seen as a process of active involvement; people prosecute and reflect on their own actions. But people are also a me. That is, all of us have a status as fairly stable objects in other people's—and our own—estimations. This division between the self as active negotiator (the I tradition) and the self as stable object (the me or identity tradition) figures importantly in the social sciences.

In keeping with the ideas of his times, James's view of the self emphasizes the private, entrepreneurial individual. As we have seen, themes of I and me predominate. However, later commentators expand this notion. For example, philosopher Charles Peirce commented on the role of the "you" in self-development. An attribution of you status occurs when people acknowledge the subjectivity of others as creatures like ourselves with similar capabilities for thinking and acting (Wiley 1994). Out of these intersubjective interactions with similar persons arise our own judgments and anticipations. Important, as well, is the sense that selves can take the form of we and us. Although we sometimes experience selfhood as private and oppositional, at other times we feel what it means to be connected to others and to act in concert with them. Both Dewey and Charles Horton Cooley (1964) developed this theme of collective capability and circumstance. In other words, and to use Sutton-Smith's terms, activities (such as play) may be about communal identity as much as they are about more narrowly conceived versions of self-identity.

Is selfhood something we experience only in the moments of life or does self-experience transcend these moments? Once again, contemporary academics debate this issue. Modernists tend to support the idea of a transcendent self (characterized by enduring understandings and commitments that cross time and place). Postmodernists emphasize the theme of particular, ever-changing and "situated" selves that emerge in acts of involvement (Gergen 1991). In this sense, postmodernists frequently oppose the idea of a unifying or core self. For his part, James argues that there is a "pure ego" or "self of all the other selves" that organizes our responses to the world. Here he follows Kant, who emphasizes the ways in which people frame experiences through their own conceptual lenses. However, James also recognizes that this more stable system of orientations and evaluations depends on—indeed has been built upon—our particular relationships with others. In this light, an unexpected failure at an enterprise we consider important or a stinging rebuke from someone we love can cause us to reevaluate the way we see ourselves and how we approach new situations.

Is selfhood a consciously monitored affair? Does it depend on processes of reflection and analysis? James, as I mentioned, believed that people are situated in—or connected to—the world. These involvements may cause them to be stirred or moved, and those stirrings may rise to conscious awareness. Indeed, he proposed a somewhat controversial theory that claims that our emotions are the conscious—and after the fact—registrations of those internal physical stirrings (James 1884). We feel our skin tingling and our nerves on edge and conclude that we are scared. Today, neuroscientists recognize that the human brain operates at many levels, only some of which we recognize as conscious thinking (Le Doux 1996; Panksepp 2004). That is to say, organisms have many systems of recognition and response to external and internal events.

In an extension of this view, neuroscientist Antonio Damasio (1994, 1999) argues that organisms have multiple levels of self. A first and most basic of these is what he calls the *protoself*. Many species are able to map their standing in situations, for example, to recognize that they are in danger (or in the presence of food) and to act accordingly. Some creatures have an additional or second-order level of awareness, what Damasio calls a *core self*. This means they are able to recognize how circumstances are producing reactions in their bodies. In other words, they have some sense of themselves as active agents (or subjects) in the moments of their lives and some awareness of the feelings that are coursing through their bodies.

What Damasio calls the autobiographical self represents a third-order (and final) level of self. In addition to the two other levels of recognition, some creatures (like humans) understand themselves in ways that transcend their particular present situations. They can remember events from the past, conjure the future, and (in the most extreme cases) create in their minds entirely imaginary scenarios. In short, for Damsio, humans have a sense of who they are, who they have been, and who they can be that is disconnected from concrete, momentary, practical existence.

Play as Self-Realization

I make no claim my treatment of the self is fully developed here. However, I have attempted to identify some of the issues that must be addressed if one wishes to present a wide-ranging conception of the self and to connect that conception to the behaviors we call play. Human beings participate in the world in concrete,

sensuous ways and feel themselves participating in these ways. But they also think about their involvements and use those thinking processes to monitor and direct their affairs. Those internally based patterns of recognition and response, as Damasio emphasizes, are manifested at different levels of consciousness.

It may be that I have focused too much on a cognitive approach to self-functioning. That is, my emphasis has been placed on how people perceive and think about their circumstances. This thought-based, even introspective, approach is central to James's analysis. Surely, it is also the case that self-expression rests on deep (and evolutionarily prior) levels of psychobiological processing. Even animals without highly developed cortices still play. Human awareness is an extension of those creatures' sensibilities. In other words, our expressive capabilities are dependent also on physiological, affect-centered patterns.

In my view, a wide-ranging theory of self must address both themes. There is the sense in which self-expression—and especially the play behaviors I am considering here—is a realization of ideals. That is to say, people form ideas and images in their minds and try these out in (physically conditioned) behaviors. But there is also the sense in which selfhood is an idealization of reality. In this latter viewpoint, human existence constitutes a concourse of physiologically conditioned needs and urges and of involuntary behaviors connected to these feelings. Cognition is the process of trying to comprehend, control, and communicate these fundamental goings-on.

In other words, people understand themselves in two ways. On the one hand, they "stand under" cognitively conceived principles that permit the pausing of behavior and the consideration of its alternatives. They also "stand under" physiological principles that shape the possibilities of living. Both types of framing shape our comprehensions of self or, to use the language I introduced previously, of our capacities to recognize and respond.

One specific quest is to comprehend ourselves as objects in the schemes of otherness—and especially in the judgments of other people. But that sense of being a me (or objectified presence) is supplemented by the perception that we are also an I; that is, a subjective agent who negotiates our standings in those relationships. To recall James's argument, individuals have a special interest in themselves as private agents. But every person also knows what it means to band with others to become a we and an us. We also know the meanings of being confronted or called out (as a you) and—though I have not developed this theme here—what it means to be a him or her, them, or it who has little say in others' actions and characterizations.

Although humans gauge themselves especially by their relations to other people, social involvement does not provide the only setting for selfhood. We also experience ourselves amidst the occurrences we call culture, the environment, our physical bodies, and even the goings-on of our own minds. We participate in these fields of relationships and claim some of the patterns we find there as me or mine and identify other patterns as externalities. Most of those relationships—between consciousness and elements of the world—are extremely fleeting and particular (such as our sense of an idea or image suddenly coming to mind, a gurgling in our stomachs, or the sounds of an approaching storm). But we also develop general knowledge about phenomena of those types and understand ourselves to have ongoing connections and commitments to a world so defined. We are members of families, participants in sports teams, fans of musical groups, residents of small towns, good at spelling, possessed of red hair, overweight, and so forth. We understand ourselves to have a distinctive biography, a set of current capabilities and traits, and visions for the future. In such ways, selves are essentially projections of personhood, ways in which people put themselves forward in situations (Henricks 2012). As I have stressed, putting oneself forward means having both a set of orientations that one claims as his own (an I) and a set of reflections about how these occurrences are affecting him as a person (a me). To have a self—or to have multiple selves, to take the postmodern approach—is to prosecute one's own standings in the world.

As I said at the beginning, my thesis is that play is about these issues. When people play, they realize themselves through activity in the world. It may be objected that the portrait of the self presented here—and the connection of this to play—is entirely too general to be of use to scholars. I would respond that understanding play—at least at any deep or abiding level—requires this general approach. As I have developed, play occurs in cultural, social, psychological, bodily, and environmental settings. People play with elements of these sorts— poems, peers, private fantasies, bodily formations and feelings, toys, and so on. Like self-experience, play is intensely particular. Players live in the moment; indeed, no two moments of play are ever quite the same. Yet, and also like self-experience, these momentary participations draw energy from—and are given meaning by—ongoing formations that instigate and support these activities. So understood, play becomes a pattern of communication between particular experiences and general capabilities.

Also, and again like self-experience more generally, play is a balancing act in which an individual moves between being in and out of control. As humans,

we participate in a world largely external to us, one that obeys its own (multiple) logics and necessities. Other people and groups have their own ideas about what should happen. The material environment is largely indifferent to our concerns. Culture follows its own logic of development and, in our machine age, its own courses of action. Our bodies exhibit their own processes, many of which defy our control or consent. Even our own mind, for James the most prized possession of the self, can follow its own course. To have a self is to identify which of these ongoing patterns and processes we can claim as our own and to turn these possessions into resources that we can use to manage our lives. That self-quest is identical to the quest of play.

In short, play is an exploration of powers and predicaments. We play to find out what we can—and cannot—do and to see if we can extend our capabilities. As a consequence of these attempts, we also learn what the world can do to us. Not surprisingly, play varies according to the character of the world element we confront and our own standing respective to that element.

As I noted in the section on the self, sometimes people feel themselves to be (relatively) in control of their circumstances, the condition I called privilege. Some play then is manipulative in character. As in Piaget's (1962) account of assimilation, the player seeks to control, repeat, and thereby gain assurance about her powers. Other play addresses the fact of the player's subordination. Forces that are too powerful must be taunted, defied, and evaded; this type of play—what I call rebellion—is associated especially with the writings of Sutton-Smith (2008; Sutton-Smith and Kelly-Byrne 1984.)

Other theorists celebrate the style of play that occurs in more balanced, reciprocal circumstances (Csikszentmihalyi 1991; Vygotsky 1978). This form of play resembles a dialogue of mutually implicating commitments. Finally, there is the type of play that confronts the facts of marginality. This sort of distant, musing, imaginative involvement with the external world can be called exploratory play (Singer and Singer 2005). However different these four styles of play may be, all celebrate an individual's ability to confront and contest the world (Henricks 2010).

For such reasons, I believe that Sutton-Smith's rhetoric of self-experience (as one focus of play studies) can be broadened to include the other rhetorics he discusses. To accomplish this, one must accept the proposition that selfhood is not only about subjective experience but also about the acquisition of skills, knowledge, and action commitments and, even more generally, about people's comprehension of their placement in circumstances. Let us examine

then another of his rhetorics. Sutton-Smith follows Huizinga in recognizing that play is often about relations of power, showdowns that make public the respective capabilities of the persons and groups involved. In play, people do not always win or get their way. To some extent, they do not desire that they should always win. What they do desire is the opportunity to see the implications of competition for self-standing and experience. To recall the third Sutton-Smith rhetoric, play may also be focused on imaginary matters. Such play, however, does not usually involve mundane mental exploits. Instead, we want to see what our minds can come up with and, even more critically, to see how effectively consciousness itself can respond to these improbable stirrings. Indeed, in all these manifestations, play is about the consequences of self-expression, especially when those efforts encounter the resistance of the world.

This quest for self-apprehension is also displayed in the rhetoric of fate. Gamblers desire to learn their place in the universe and, more precisely, to find out whether they are favored by the forces that control the unfolding of possibilities. However, players are not passive spectators in this process. Typically, they do all they can to influence the revelations of the dice, cards, wheel, and other devices of chance. Not entirely dissimilar is Sutton-Smith's rhetoric of community identity. Players, when joined together and bonded by feelings of we, explore their collective capabilities and the implications of these publicly acknowledged feelings. What one person cannot do, many can. As in the other rhetorics described in this article, people play to discover expanded versions of self.

This same sort of reasoning can be applied to the rhetoric of frivolity. There are many reasons why people smile or laugh. Only some of these relate to play. Play's special contribution to human experience is its encouragement of a testing, teasing, mocking pattern of public relating. Players take the world, including its social conventions, apart and then restyle those elements according to the players' whims. Play, like self-knowledge more generally, examines the limits of propriety. Players adore discontinuity and surprise, but they also congratulate themselves when they repair those disjunctions (as when they follow or get the joke).

Sutton-Smith's best-known rhetoric involves the play (in both animals and humans) connected to individual development or progress. Although it may seem to be only trivial entertainment or relaxation, play both creates and practices the capabilities required (if only potentially) by adults. As might be anticipated, this thesis is especially pertinent to youthful play; for in many spe-

cies it is the young who spend significant portions of their time playing and who initiate play episodes with adults. This play-as-progress thesis is clearly congenial with the view that play fosters development, not only of skills but also of knowledge and experiences that are relevant to self-definition. Broadly stated, play disrupts habitual modes of living and substitutes new behaviors. To this degree, it changes people.

As some may have noticed, Sutton-Smith's rhetoric of progress resembles the self-realization thesis I present in this article. I should emphasize again, however, that play and self-realization are only rarely about straight-ahead development. As I have argued, play frequently attempts to expand and solidify one's powers, to acquire the capabilities required of adults. But play can also be a willful act of regression, an attempt to remember and revivify capabilities that were once dear to earlier stages of life. And, as Sutton-Smith himself empha-sizes, it can also be a clever sidestep into foolishness and frivolity, that is, into matters that seem inappropriate for children or adults. To summarize, players may be entranced by the future, but they can be just as committed to recalling entertaining pursuits from the past or to sponsoring pointless antics that seem antithetical to their current responsibilities. In this sense, play embraces all the rhetorics of time (Henricks 2009b). This same quest—to appreciate who one is, has been, can be, and does not wish to be—is the project of selfhood.

Why use the word "realization" to describe play's quest? After all, notions of self-development or progress are surely more standard currency. As I have implied, I do not believe that play moves people only ahead; it moves people in many directions. If reaching adulthood was the ambition of players, older people would not play. I also reject the terms self-discovery and self-invention. Discov-ery implies that one has found something that already exists (but that heretofore has been unknown to the seeker). Play may well cause us to call up resources we didn't know we had in us; but play is also about the manufacturing of knowledge, skills, and life experiences which we have not possessed to this point. Still, play is not simply self-invention, a process of creating ourselves in our desired image. As anyone knows, who we become as well as what we make of the world depends in part on the materials with which we work. These materials include our own latent physical and psychological capacities, the wishes and capabilities of other people, the resources of the material environment, and even available cultural elements. In this sense, playful interaction is a dialogue between self and these forms of otherness. As a parallel (if more general) process, self-realization is the process by which people put into action their visions of who they are and what

they can do. Play's special interest is the personal consequences of these schemes.

I could end my discussion here, but I think it important to address one additional issue. Aren't there other kinds of behaviors that realize the self just as well as—or perhaps better than—play? After all, one of the great declarations in the social sciences is Karl Marx's (1999) statement regarding work in his *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, written in 1844. Marx argues that labor (understood in a particular way) is the essential means by which humans realize the spectrum of their capabilities, including their relationship to other people. When they create something through the combined efforts of their minds and hands, the creation reflects back to them their fully human qualities. It is right that individuals should be allowed to appropriate the world in this way, that is, to transform it according to their own needs. And these makers should also be allowed to enjoy the fruits of their labors. That sort of dedicated, instrumental activity is also praised by Dewey and Montessori. Work, perhaps with a playful or expressive spirit, is the chief vehicle of self-realization.

A quite different theme emerges from another great social scientist, Emile Durkheim. For Durkheim (1961, 1964, 1965), the sickness of the modern age is its unregulated individualism. Not surprisingly, he was an opponent of the utilitarian and social-contract philosophies that have been popular in European-influenced societies. What humans need in the contemporary era, or so Durkheim argued, are qualities of societal respect and moral discipline. Although he also championed the rights of individuals, Durkheim believed that people must recognize their dependence on the great human communities that make possible the freedoms and rights they possess. For such reasons, people need rituals. That is because rituals provide us with cognitive and moral direction, regulate our desires, and coordinate our relationships with other people. Freud (1967) also believed that rituals steady people; and for that reason some of his descriptions of play seem like accounts of obsessive-compulsive rituals. However, Durkheim recognized (more clearly than Freud) that rituals also make us acknowledge our indebtedness to otherness (such as society or culture) as the basis of our living. Because they promote this deeper understanding of who we are and reaffirm important life commitments, rituals are fundamental paths of self-realization.

When asked his opinion about the challenges of living fully and well, Freud answered—or is reputed to have answered—that there are two fundamental commitments: to work and to love (Smelser and Erikson 1980). Surely, love is a profoundly important path of self-realization. Love makes us recognize—and indeed is the act of recognizing profoundly—the inherent worth of others.

And unlike ritual, which is pointedly obligatory and even instrumental in its purposes, love has no ambitions beyond the themes of connection and commitment. Ideally at least, we do not love so that we may feel steadied or so we may move more effectively through our days. We are expanded by our feelings of love and, again ideally, we love so that we can expand and fulfill others. In my own writing (2006, 2012), I have treated this theme of communal bonding as *communitas*. As any anthropologist might note, people in traditional societies desire and are ennobled by public gatherings that help them acknowledge the importance of all. Some of these events are quite serious, others festive. In other societies, people also gather at reunions, fairs, picnics, concerts, sports events, and the like. Although these gatherings are not entirely the same as those of traditional societies (Turner 1979), they are occasions where we find pleasure in one another's company, applaud the actions of others, and align our spirit with that of the community. This act of public immersion is tremendously important to our understandings of who we are. But it is different from play's testing, teasing commitment.

Psychologist David Elkind (2007) has argued that play should be added to Freud's themes of love and work to make a triumvirate of human commitments. I believe that Durkheim's theme of ritual (or worship, in its most idealized sense) should be added as well. But what makes play different from these other forms of self-realization? Why is play important?

In my view, play is a distinctive pathway for the construction of self. Like workers, players take particular elements of the world and turn them into something different from what they were before. However, workers commit these acts of transformation for instrumental purposes; typically, they must be motivated by external or extrinsic rewards. In contrast, play is a commitment to the act of transformation and to the forms of self-awareness that arise during this process. Consciousness is contained or consumed by these moments of making (understood both as taking apart and building up). Because players give themselves—and are allowed to give themselves—to the bounded reality that is the event, they are freed to contemplate the reality-construction process as a whole, their own role in this process, and the vicissitudes of standing and experience that result from the different things that happen. It may be that work more efficiently develops us by encouraging us to refine and improve our techniques for achieving goals that are pertinent to our life interests. But play distills experience and encourages us to try new practices.

If work engraves some strategies of selfhood, another pattern that ful-

fills the same effect is ritual. Both involve habits of repeating and perfecting. However, ritual is profoundly different from work in that participants look to otherness—and commonly to social and cultural frameworks—for the models they follow. As work transforms, so ritual conforms. Or, to state this more precisely, workers transform the world and see their powers reflected in what they have created; ritualists allow themselves to be transformed. In the process, the devotees recognize their dependence on powers external to their own ingenuity.

These themes appear in the writing of anthropologist Victor Turner (1969), who argues that rituals are vehicles that move people through the world. Prominent among these movements are changes in social status. One does not engage in a ritual practice—brushing one's teeth the same way every day, attending a religious service, observing the terms of a greeting ritual, and so forth—simply for the pleasures of doing so. We follow these well-established practices so that we can move gracefully through the event and prepare ourselves for the next moments of our lives. As Durkheim emphasized, rituals make plain the indebtedness of people to established forms; thus, they are important pathways of self-realization. But for this very reason, they are the opposite of play.

The fourth and final strategy of self-realization is communitas. Communitas shares play's fascination with the momentary. Whether communitas is marked by utmost seriousness or wild festivity, participants are thrilled to be in the presence of something greater than themselves. Revelers fit themselves to circumstances and congratulate themselves on their collective deference and mutual support. Unlike ritual, this obeisance does not serve instrumental (or long-range) purposes; instead, participants join together to experience what they hold in common. Like players, communing people are excited by particularity, novelty, change, and ambiguity as these are generated by an occasion they cannot entirely control. Unlike players, revelers acknowledge readily that most of the impetus for this excitement and confusion comes from the situation itself and from the contributions of the other attendees. Players take an active, assertive role in their own amusement; revelers subordinate their individuality to the spirit of the event.

Do these different life strategies fulfill different functions for the individual or for the group? In what is still one of the most compelling accounts of functionalism in the social sciences, Talcott Parsons (1964, 1971) argues that systems (be these organic, psychological, social, or cultural) have four different needs or requisites that must be met if these systems are to maintain themselves as coherent entities. The first of these is what he calls adaptation, the need to respond to

basic survival needs by addressing external realities. The second is integration, the need for systems to regulate or harmonize relationships between their various elements. The third is pattern maintenance, the need to define and reaffirm basic principles of orientation (such as values). Fourth, and finally, is goal attainment, the need to identify goals and coordinate procedures for reaching these.

It will not surprise the reader to learn that I believe work is the strategy that most effectively addresses adaptation; communitas responds to the challenges of integration; and ritual reinforces the orientation patterns that are critical to pattern maintenance. Play, by contrast, is preoccupied with issues of goal attainment. This is to say, play facilitates individuals' learning to identify goals (however trivial these may be) and to coordinate the many self-qualities that are pertinent to achieving these ends. Play, at both the individual and social levels, practices and refines capability.

I should acknowledge quickly that most human activities do not fit neatly into these four strategies of self-realization. Who of us has not been involved in work-like play or (as Dewey encouraged) in play-like work? Our attendance at a party surely mixes communitas (our showing up at a certain time, wearing the right clothing, adopting the proper demeanor, complimenting the host, or laughing at a joke we have heard a dozen times before) with our own playful attempts to improvise, tease, and amuse. Many playful contests (such as major sporting events) are heavily ritualized; so are many of our work activities. Life is a mixture of transformation and conformation, long-range purposes, and commitments that are more immediate.

Indeed, this is Piaget's (1962) theme. Human behavior is sometimes an expression of what he called assimilation, that is, an attempt of people to make the world submit to their own privately inspired strategies. In my view, play and work represent, respectively, the expressive and instrumental poles of this assimilative quest. But sometimes, behavior is better understood as accommodation, that is, as an adjustment of thought and behavior to the demands of the world. Again, my view is that ritual constitutes the instrumental (and thereby more obligating) pattern, while communitas is its expressive equivalent. Together, these strategies must be combined in the broader commitment that Piaget calls adaptation, essentially discovering a sustainable trajectory through life. Acknowledging that real life mixes the ideal types so dear to theorists does not diminish the point that activities in the world can be described as being more or less playful, ritualistic, work-like, and communal. Moreover, identifying play as one of the fundamental forms of human relating keeps alive the prospect of

understanding the importance of transformative, consuming activities in the human quest for self-realization. Play is not trivial endeavor. It is necessary for comprehending what we can be and what we can do.

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