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# Sport, Philosophy, and Good Lives

Randolph Feezell

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**SPORT,**  
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**SPORT,**  
*Philosophy,*  
**and Good Lives**

**RANDOLPH FEEZELL**

University of Nebraska Press  
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# Contents

Introduction vii

## **Part One. Sport and Good Lives**

1. A Pluralist Conception of Play 1
2. Sport, Vulnerability, and Unhappiness 29
3. Losing Is Like Death 49
4. The Pitfalls of Partisanship 73
5. Sport, Dirty Language, and Ethics 93

## **Part Two. Sport and Ethical Guidance**

6. Celebrated Athletes and Role Models 131
7. Coach as Sage 155

## **Part Three. Sport and Meaning**

8. Sport and the Question of the Meaning of Life 187
9. Meaning, Sport, and Deflationary Attitudes 221

Notes 239

Index 269

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## Introduction

This book discusses sport in the context of some traditional philosophical questions. What is a good human life? To whom do we look for ethical guidance? What is the meaning of life? (What is a meaningful life? What makes human activities or projects meaningful?) These are big questions that have been important in the history of philosophy. I first considered referring to “sport and big questions” in the title, since the notions of good lives, ethical guidance, and meaning are central in the book. I came to see that a reference to good lives was the unifying motif, and even the issue of meaning in life could be understood to be part of a larger reflection about how to live well, what are the constituents of good human lives, and how sport might fit into the picture. Also, whereas the consideration of the ethics of swearing, for example, might seem to be a puzzling addition to a book about sport and “big questions,” the arguments involved in considering whether we ought to cuss, inside and outside of sports, involve issues about how best to live.

In relation to these unifying questions and issues, some of the specific topics in the book are less surprising than others. When thinking about the attraction and value of sports, some have empha-



sized the role of play, as I do. Some have stressed the importance of our sport heroes as role models who can have a positive influence on others. In contrast, it is less common to consider pessimistic views of sports that stress sport participants' vulnerabilities, the ethics of swearing, coaches who use their authority to offer sage advice to their players about how to live well (coach as sage), and the conditions on the basis of which we consider lives and activities meaningful—with an eye toward the contribution of sports to meaningful lives.

In the first part of the book, I begin by examining the extensive literature on play. I show that play resists a simple or parsimonious reduction to an attitude that engages an activity for its own sake (the common view among philosophers of sport). A pluralistic conception of play illuminates the relation between sport and play and the contribution of playful activities to good human lives. Next, I examine various reasons for pessimistic views of sport. I contrast an optimizing view of happiness, which stresses desire satisfaction, and the strategy of adaptation found in Stoicism, Buddhism, and Taoism, which recommends wisely adapting one's desires to the world in order to avoid unhappiness. Given the ways in which sport is a locus of vulnerability for participants, I argue for a moderate form of desire adaptation, including the moderation of fans' passionate desires for the success of their teams. This discussion leads naturally to a more extended examination of the ethics of supporting sports teams, which I offer in chapter 4. In the last chapter of part I, I examine the ethics of using dirty language, an unusual but fascinating topic. Because some of the common arguments for the elimination of cussing appeal to prudence, social good, and virtue, it is appropriate to examine this issue in the context of references that presuppose elements of living well. Furthermore, because dirty language is so prevalent in the world of sports, it is appropriate to focus on sport examples. The relevant arguments obviously extend beyond sports, however. I distinguish two extreme positions, the puritan rejection of swearing and the

vulgarian unqualified acceptance of potty mouth. I defend a position I call “moderate vulgarianism.” I end the chapter with some practical suggestions.

In part 2, I critically examine the common view that celebrated athletes are role models. I argue that the term *role model* is ambiguous, as are judgments that involve this notion. Once we distinguish being a role model in a narrow and a broad sense, and the difference between making a descriptive or a normative claim about role models, we are in a position to sort out the strengths and weaknesses of various claims about sports heroes as role models. I end the discussion by suggesting that we should think of our sports heroes as fictional objects that are imaginatively constructed in the context of the sports world, rather than everyday individuals like you and me. In this part I also examine another relatively unusual topic. Many view coaches as particularly well suited to offer various kinds of advice about how to win games, leadership, management skills, and so forth. Some coaches seem to think they are in a position to offer sage advice about how to live, as if they are more interested in the ethical development of the whole person, not simply developing the person qua athlete. Although many have bemoaned contemporary athletes’ sense of entitlement (to act boorishly, selfishly, even violently), few have questioned coaches’ sense of entitlement to offer ethical instruction to athletes, especially in the context of college athletics. In this chapter I offer a discussion of a recent coach book whose pretensions are immoderate, especially when we think about such issues against the background of thoughtful advice offered in the history of philosophy, both Western and non-Western, about how to live well. After considering an alternative model of coaching and ethical guidance, I offer some conclusions about the proper use of coaches’ authority.

In the final part of the book I examine a topic that requires a wide-ranging examination of the recent literature, especially in analytic philosophy, about the question of the meaning of life. It

seems to be intuitively plausible to think of sports activities as meaningful and to believe that such activities contribute to meaningful lives. It is not at all clear, however, what such claims mean. It is rare, in popular sports-talk discourse, to raise the possibility that sports participation is attractive and that it is so difficult for athletes to give up their involvement in sports, because such involvements are meaningful. The common view is that athletes are motivated by a thirst for competition. I examine the less common view that sports contribute meaning to lives. I discuss attempts to provide general accounts of meaningful lives in terms of conditions that must be met in order for lives to be meaningful. I do this in order to generate a broader view of the meaning of meaning in judgments about meaningful lives and activities. I offer a somewhat paradoxical view that the question of the meaning of life (or, rather, the conditions under which activities and lives are meaningful) is much less important than one might think. Meaning is everywhere. On the other hand, sport is more important than some think because it provides a significant space of meaning in life.

I hope the book effectively balances topics that have been a part of scholarly philosophy of sport discussions (play, the ethics of supporting sports teams, the role-model argument) and more unusual topics (sport and unhappiness, swearing, coach as sage, sport and the meaning of life) that may raise new questions for both scholars and generalists. My purpose is not only to raise questions, but also to offer alternative ways to look at sports and different ways to understand our attachments to these activities. As with my previous work, I confess that these philosophical reflections are personal, in the sense that I attempt to understand my own lifelong love affair with sport and my dissatisfaction with typical ways of talking about and understanding sports found in our commercial culture. There is more to sport than is suggested by the ethos that seems to be the common denominator expressed on sports-talk radio, on ESPN, and in other popular media outlets. There is more to sports than winning, competition, and money. We need alternative vocab-

ularies in order to understand ourselves as well as our involvements. In stressing my existential connection to these issues, I also assume that my own experiences as a player, coach, and fan (and university professor) have not been wholly idiosyncratic. For example, it may be unusual yet illuminating to attempt to develop attitudes toward sport that involve patterns of desire adaptation described in non-Western approaches to life, or to understand part of the attractiveness of sport by using the category of meaning rather than the usual suspects.

Some might complain that in some cases my discussion displaces sport as the central topic and uses it merely as an occasion to raise questions about traditional philosophical issues (the meaning of life) or topics that are larger than sport-specific issues (the ethics of speech). I do not see the alternatives as mutually exclusive. In much of the book sport is the central object of philosophical reflection. In some cases sport is used to occasion reflection on traditional philosophical issues, yet the ultimate goal is to illuminate sport, albeit in a somewhat more indirect way and in a manner that has implications for life outside sport. The chapter on sport and the question of the meaning of life requires an extended discussion of the types of answers that have been given by philosophers. Although the topic of sport may seem to be largely absent in that chapter (ignoring the introductory remarks and sport-related counterexamples), the point is to provide the philosophical background for an account of sport found in the final chapter. There, I suggest that sport is a significant “space of meaning” in life.

I direct my book toward a diverse audience. Perhaps scholars will find in this book something worthy to consider, and both undergraduates and graduate students might find interesting topics here. I would be disappointed, however, if the book proved to be less than accessible to a broader, literate audience. The Barnes and Noble crowd will find the writing clear, and some of my examples from contemporary sports will be familiar. They may have to work in places to follow my arguments, but there is nothing particularly

esoteric in any of my discussions. If you play or have played or coached these games, or if you find yourself often watching, listening to, or reading about these activities, I suspect you will find something of interest here, or at least something to think about and even contest. All of us, including sports geeks, are philosophers.

**Part One.**

*Sport and Good Lives*

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# 1 A Pluralist Conception of Play

The philosophical and scientific literature on play is extensive, and the approaches to the study, description, and explanation of play are diverse. In this chapter I intend to provide an overview of approaches to play. My interest is in describing the most fundamental categories in terms of which play is characterized, explained, and evaluated. Insofar as these categories attempt to describe what kind of reality we are talking about when we make claims about play, I hope to clarify the metaphysics of play. Once this categorical scheme is made clear, we will be in a better position to evaluate the task of definition, claims about the relation of sport and play, and assertions about the significance of play. First, I place the discussion in the context of Bernard Suits's account of play and some other recent approaches to play. Next, I distinguish the following approaches to play: play as behavior or action; play as motive, attitude, or state of mind; play as form or structure; play as meaningful experience; play as an ontologically distinctive phenomenon. There is a natural progression in the way the analysis unfolds. In the final section I argue that my analysis generates a pluralist, non-reductive account of play.



## 1. The Question of Play

It may appear that there is very little new under the sun for a philosopher to say about play. This is in striking contrast to the growing science of play. In various scientific fields there are lively and ongoing debates about the evolutionary and neuroscientific bases of play, occasioning numerous research programs and new theories about what is going on when animals and children, especially, engage in playful behavior. Scientists seem not to be as worried about the kinds of questions that worry philosophers, yet such questions cannot be ignored, except by stipulation. What *is* play? Can it be defined? How is it recognized? Is it good? Why is it good? How is play related to other significant cultural activities, like art or religion? What is the relation between sport and play? How does play contribute to a good life?

I have been impressed recently by the differences between more simplified accounts of play and the enormous diversity of play phenomena that are mentioned and studied outside of philosophy of sport by scholars in various fields. Whereas some philosophical discussions have focused on the canonical texts written by Johan Huizinga and Roger Caillois,<sup>1</sup> and have generated relatively broad notions of play involving a variety of characteristics, others have been suspicious of the supposed scope of play. Yet when some scientifically informed scholars have been forced to offer a definition or a philosophical account of play, they inevitably turn to Huizinga and offer at least a variation on a theme described in *Homo Ludens*. Bernard Suits, eminent philosopher of sport and “*paediatrician*,” has produced an account of play that some philosophical scholars of sport have largely taken for granted. His “words on play” have been taken to be the final words, so to speak. It is against the background of his provocative early essay on play (as well as some later comments) that I wish to rethink some issues concerning the unity and diversity of play, its relation to sport, and its value.<sup>2</sup>

In his essay “Words on Play,” Suits combines his interest in pur-

suing the traditional philosophical task of definition with his suspicion about claims concerning the scope of play phenomena. Why look for a definition of play? Why attempt to overcome Wittgensteinian objections to such a task? Suits responds: “chiefly because a definition is a kind of restriction or limitation, and I believe that, ever since Huizinga began to find play under nearly every rock in the social landscape, quite a bit too much has been made of the notion.”<sup>3</sup>

Early on Suits offers three claims that are particularly relevant for this discussion. First, he agrees with the common view that play involves activities that are ends in themselves or desired for their own sake. All play is autotelic, as opposed to instrumental. Autotelicity is a necessary condition of play, but he denies that all autotelic activities are instances of play. “In other words, I regard autotelicity as necessary but not sufficient for an adequate definition of play.” Next, he denies that there is a logical relation between playing and playing games. Despite the fact that we speak of “playing” games, he considers such usages to indicate merely that we are participating in a game; we may or may not be playing. For example, when we speak of playing a musical instrument, we are indicating performance, not necessarily play. Sometimes game playing is playing, but it may not be, because of the autotelicity requirement. This leads Suits to say the following (which many take to be obvious—I don’t): “That one has to be playing in order to be playing a game seems equally implausible. When professional athletes are performing in assigned games for wages, although they are certainly playing games, we are not at all inclined to conclude from that fact that they are without qualification playing. For we think of professional athletes as working when they play their games and as playing when they go home from work to romp with their children.” Third, Suits recognizes that his account of play (which I will mention in a moment) is at odds with a variety of common usages, yet he insists that such figurative or metaphorical usages are nonetheless valuable. If we combine an account that places a boundary

on the concept of play and an awareness of the vast array of ordinary usages of the word, we identify a helpful avenue of inquiry, “since an explanation of *how* they are figurative requires a sorting out of the respects in which the thing at issue is, and the respects in which it is not, play or a game.”<sup>4</sup>

For Suits the sorting is relatively simple, because we merely have to relate autotelicity (a genus) to the way we use resources in certain activities (a specific difference). For example, little Johnny is rebuked for playing with his food, a resource normally used for nutrition. Here is Suits’s definition of play: “X is playing if and only if x has made a temporary reallocation to autotelic activities of resources primarily committed to instrumental activities.”<sup>5</sup> According to Suits, when we temporarily reallocate *any* resource to intrinsically valued activities, including time or energy, we are playing.

For now, let’s turn from Suits’s words on play to some other recent words, written by, respectively, Colin McGinn, a very fine philosopher; Diane Ackerman, a very fine essayist and poet; and Stuart Brown, a very fine (I presume) medical doctor, psychiatrist, and clinical researcher. First is a comment from McGinn, in a book about sport and a discussion of his attempt to improve his tennis game:

Certainly, tennis, like other sports, is a form of play. . . . Play is a vital part of any full life, and a person who never plays is worse than a “dull boy”: he or she lacks imagination, humour and a proper sense of value. Only the bleakest and most life-denying Puritanism could warrant deleting all play from human life. . . . Play is part of what makes human life worthwhile, and we should seek to get as much out of it as we can.<sup>6</sup>

In a beautiful book-length meditation on “deep play,” the most deeply absorbing and “ecstatic” form of play, Diane Ackerman writes:

The spirit of deep play is central to the life of each person, and also to society, inspiring the visual, musical, and verbal arts; exploration and

discovery; war; law; and other elements of culture we've come to cherish (or dread). . . .

This book is not a conclusion but an exploration. It invites you to look closely at the human saga, and consider how much of it revolves around play. . . . Indeed, it's our passion for deep play that makes us the puzzling and at times resplendent beings we are.<sup>7</sup>

Finally, Stuart Brown, founder of the National Institute on Play, expresses thoughts based on forty years of conducting play studies and taking more than six thousand "play histories" of all kinds of people:

I have found that remembering what play is all about and making it part of our daily lives are probably the most important factors in being a fulfilled human being. . . .

I don't think it is too much to say that play can save your life. It certainly has salvaged mine. Life without play is a grinding, mechanical existence organized around doing things necessary for survival. Play is the stick that stirs the drink. It is the basis of all art, games, books, sports, movies, fashion, fun, and wonder—in short, the basis of what we think of as civilization. Play is the vital essence of life. It is what makes life lively. . . .

The world needs play because it enables each person to live a good life.<sup>8</sup>

The contrast between Suits's attitude and approach and these enthusiastic claims about the value of play is noteworthy. When Suits considers play, he thinks there is much less there than meets the eye. He offers a tidy conceptual analysis that attempts to deflate the Huizingian notion that there is "play under nearly every rock in the social landscape." On the other hand, these contemporary playologists (if I may coin a term) do see the pervasive influence and importance of play in human life. Huizinga was right, they tell us. Play is under a lot of rocks. Diane Ackerman makes the influence of Huizinga explicit: "From time to time, this book becomes a fantasia on a theme by Huizinga, in which I play with some of his

ideas, amplify them, follow their shadows and nuances.” Brown gets no further than chapter 2 before he brings his own “foundational definition” into relation with Huizinga’s famous discussion. Although McGinn does not explicitly mention Huizinga, his comments about entering a magical world with its own rules and goals, play and seriousness, freedom, and ridding ourselves of ordinary existence are well-known elements in Huizinga’s analysis.<sup>9</sup> One problem with Suits’s approach is this: Should we accept his definition, we would have no idea, based on his account, why so much has been made of making a “temporary reallocation to autotelic activities of resources primarily committed to instrumental activities.” We are left in the dark about the common forms and experiences of activities that typically involve such reallocation and why our neo-Huizingians value it so highly.

Now contrast Suits’s definition with Huizinga’s frequently cited words on play summarizing his account. (This will be a useful reference for the following discussion.)

Summing up the formal characteristics of play we might call it a free activity standing quite consciously outside “ordinary” life as being “not serious,” but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly. It is an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it. It proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner. It promotes the formation of social groupings which tend to surround themselves with secrecy and to stress their difference from the common world by disguise or other means.

. . . Play is a voluntary activity or occupation executed within certain fixed limits of time and place, according to rules freely accepted but absolutely binding, having its aim in itself and accompanied by a feeling of tension, joy and the consciousness that it is “different” from “ordinary life.”<sup>10</sup>

It is evident from this brief overview of claims about play that there are different approaches to the study, description, and evalu-

ation of play. Undoubtedly, there is a startling diversity of phenomena associated with play. A noted scholar of play, Brian Sutton-Smith, refers to the “ambiguity of play” in his important book, but he is most interested in what he calls “the ideological underpinnings of play theories.” My focus will be on the attempt to understand the diversity of play phenomena rather than the diversity of play scholarship and what he calls the “rhetorics,” or rhetorical underpinnings, of different theories of play.<sup>11</sup>

## II. Approaches to Play

### *A. Play as Behavior or Action*

Diane Ackerman begins her book by saying, “Everyone understands play.” In one sense that is not quite right, because there is considerable controversy about the question of definition. We can, however, wield the concept and recognize paradigm cases of play. That is because play is initially categorized as a kind of behavior. It is something we can see or observe. It has been and continues to be extensively studied by scientists who are interested in both animal and human play. My son picks up our dog’s chew toy, and she immediately perks up, exhibits the “play bow,” paws outstretched on the floor with her rump raised in the air, and wants the toy to be thrown, after which she sprints to the toy, then coyly brings it back, waiting for it to be tossed again. Chimps exhibit a “play face,” analogous to the look of the joyous, smiling faces of children playing at the playground, running, jumping, skipping—spontaneous, improvisational, vigorous, unrestrained. Scientists tell us that play is prominent throughout the animal kingdom, not just in mammals. We are told that “animal play researchers have established specific criteria that define play behavior,” and that “most species have 10 to 100 distinct play signals that they use to solicit play or to reassure one another during play-fighting that it’s still all just fun.”<sup>12</sup> In more primitive forms, play is pure movement and motion, for no apparent reason. When animals are playing in the wild, they are not looking for food or being attentive to threats

from the environment. When children are playing, they are not living under the constraints of material needs or desires. They are “just playing,” freely and exuberantly. They appear to be enjoying themselves immensely, like the two juvenile grizzly bears in the Alaskan wilderness observed by Stuart Brown and Bob Fagen, an expert on animal play behavior. Brown asks why the bears are playing. Fagen replies, “Because it’s fun.” Brown says, “No, Bob, I mean from a scientific point of view.”<sup>13</sup>

The exchange between the two is interesting because it both separates and connects the notions of animal behavior and human activity, or play as behavior and play as activity. Play behavior in animals is “apparently purposeless,” as biologists claim.<sup>14</sup> When animals are playing, they are not, apparently, engaged in any kind of instrumental activity associated with their survival needs. Their play may be “fun,” as the animal behavior scientist claims, but there must be something biologically deeper going on. Because of the prevalence of play in animals there is the presumption that there must be some adaptive advantage associated with play behavior. This generates scientific theories about the biological usefulness of “apparently” biologically useless behavior. When pushed, Fagen says, “In a world continuously presenting unique challenges and ambiguity, play prepares these bears for an evolving planet.”<sup>15</sup> Other scientists have added to or revised the play-as-preparation hypothesis, arguing that play contributes to neural development (the growth of the cerebellum and the development of the brain’s frontal cortex) and more flexible and responsive brains.<sup>16</sup>

When we turn to human play, especially the play of children, we can ask the same sort of questions about such behavior. Play is unproductive, insofar as it is not obviously pursued for the sake of satisfying material needs. It seems as wasteful and superfluous as animal play, a useless squandering of energy. We are animals, of course, so play can be studied from the standpoint of understanding the paradox of behavior that is both apparently useless yet has some adaptive advantages. But behavior may now be thought of

as action, which humans may explicitly and self-consciously choose to engage in at least at some point in development. It is still pre-conscious and preverbal in certain contexts and to a certain developmental stage, as Brown says,<sup>17</sup> and extremely varied, but now it may be approached in terms of its unique phenomenology, which is described as extending from children to adults. The concept of “apparent purposelessness” in animal behavior leaves open the issue of play’s biological usefulness and allows the scientist to speculate about animal psychology. The bears certainly *appeared* to be having fun. For human play, the concept of “apparent purposelessness” leads naturally to the issue of what it means to choose an action for its own sake, or what it means to desire an activity as an end rather than as a means to some further end. It leads inevitably to considering psychological elements that are involved in playing, that is, engaging in intrinsically valued activities.

*B. Play as Motive, Attitude, or State of Mind*

For some philosophers of sport, like Bernard Suits (as we have seen) and Klaus Meier, it is a bit of a truism to say that play essentially involves an attitudinal component. The key to play is autotelicity, engaging in activities for their own sake or as ends in themselves. This involves the question of the de facto motives, reasons, or purposes involved when activities are undertaken. According to Suits, play requires that an activity is valued for itself. Meier holds that “autotelicity is both a necessary and sufficient trait” for play. As he says, “I wish to provide a definition based on the orientation, demeanor, or stance of the participants.” Play requires intrinsic reasons, and if our reason (exclusive? predominant?) for doing whatever we choose to do is intrinsic to the activity, it is play. “Consequently, if games or sports are pursued voluntarily and for intrinsic reasons, they are play forms; if they are pursued involuntarily or engaged in predominantly for extrinsic rewards, they are not play forms.”<sup>18</sup> Angela Schneider echoes these views when she claims that judging an activity to be play “is determined not by the nature



of the activity itself . . . but rather by the attitude of the player toward the activity.” As she says, “Playing is not a type of activity, but rather a mode of performing any activity.”<sup>19</sup> These comments distinguish play as an attitude (or having an essential attitudinal component), and classifying an activity as play depends on the context within which it is performed in specific circumstances, rather than its structure.

This way of approaching play raises the issue of the relation between claims about play as an activity and play as attitudinal. Stuart Brown describes cases of golfers he has seen playing Pebble Beach who, instead of enjoying the experience of playing one of the most famous and spectacular golf courses in the world, transform what should be a highlight of their golfing experiences into misery and unhappiness. Brown denies that they are playing. “They are self-critical, competitive, perfectionistic, and preoccupied with the last double bogey. These emotions don’t allow them to feel the playful, out-of-time, in-the-zone, doing-it-for-its-own-sake sensation that accompanies joyful playfulness.” From our tennis matches to our pickup basketball games, most of us have encountered the tortured player whose misery and unhappiness infect all those with whom he is playing. This leads Brown to say the following: “Sometimes running is play, and sometimes it is not. What is the difference between the two? It really depends on the emotions experienced by the runner. Play is a *state of mind*, rather than an activity.”<sup>20</sup>

This emphasis on the attitudinal component of play may be misleading. It may lead to a confusion between an activity and an attitude. To say that play “is a state of mind,” as Brown does, does not really make sense if we interpret the claim literally. Play is an activity that may or may not require a certain kind of attitude, but the attitude is not the activity itself. Would it make sense to say that we are playing when in fact we are doing nothing, perhaps paralyzed in a drug-induced but affirmative haze of consciousness, glad to be experiencing paralysis for its own sake? (Assume no “play

of ideas” going on in the mind of person.) If a person were hooked up to an experience machine (in Robert Nozick’s famous thought experiment), electrodes attached to his brain, giving him mental states (“experiences”) while he is floating like a blob in a tank, it would make no sense to say that the person could be playing. (Let’s say he is being fed the joyful experience of winning the U.S. Open in golf.) It would make more sense to say that the person has playful attitudes, or the “state of mind” associated with play. The miserable golfers are doing something—they are playing golf, unhappily and without any joy. Better to say, as Suits, Meier, and Schneider do, that play is an activity that requires a certain kind of attitude, or is defined in terms of the attitude we take toward the activity, that is, an activity engaged in as an end in itself or for intrinsic reasons.

Despite the fact that many philosophers of sport take this position to be obvious, some puzzling questions arise. If autotelicity is sufficient for play, as Meier insists, does this mean that we could, in principle, transform *any* activity into play? Would Sisyphus’s interminable rock rolling be magically transformed into play if the gods injected a magic potion into his veins that caused him to identify with his pointless toil? How about an apolitical functionary who spends his free time volunteering at Auschwitz, enjoying the unpaid activity of marching the Jews to the gas chambers? Fun? Is he playing? We may say that these activities are play for these persons, but, at the least, it strikes us that these are not the *kind* of activities that are either commonly or even appropriately categorized as play, as they would have to be if autotelicity were sufficient for play. This raises the question of whether certain kinds of formal requirements might be, if not necessary, at least typical and causally relevant for appropriateness. It would be helpful to be able to say more about the form or structure of activities for which it would be appropriate to have intrinsic reasons to perform them. Recall Colin McGinn’s comment that tennis, like other sports, is a form of play. If I understand his claim, he holds that tennis, as such, is

play, or sports, as such, are play activities. Suits finds these claims to be ridiculous. He says, “I have never—anywhere—made, or even entertained, the ridiculous assertions that some games or sports *as such* are play or that some *as such* are not.”<sup>21</sup> It is not clear to me why it is ridiculous to assert that play activities may have formal or structural requirements. It is also unclear what sort of argument is offered for the view that autotelicity is necessary and sufficient for play, other than the claim that it is just obvious in paradigm cases. If the argument is ultimately a phenomenological one, the phenomena require a more nuanced and thicker description.

This line of argument leads to questions about mixed motives. Suits also seems to think it is obvious that when professional athletes are playing games, they are not really engaged in play because they are being paid. They are working, not playing. As we will see, they are engaged in activities that have a certain structure, but if play requires autotelicity, professional game playing is instrumental, not autotelic. Furthermore, Suits offers the provocative thesis that Olympic athletes, “amateurs” in some sense, are not playing when participating in Olympic events, because they are acting under a compulsion to win the gold medal rather than being motivated to engage in their Olympic athletic activities simply for the sake of participation. Pickup games are autotelic; highly competitive Olympic events are not. Suits says, “I am suggesting that acting under such a compulsion, rather than the desire to win simply because winning defines the activity one is undertaking, is what turns a game that could be play into something that is not play.”<sup>22</sup>

The problem is that when we engage in certain activities, we may have a variety of motives. Even if autotelicity is necessary for play, it is not clear why an activity that has some external end could not also be desired for its own sake. Suppose I love to throw a rubber ball against a wall and catch it with my bare hands. I then develop some rules. I throw at certain angles, at certain spots, with certain velocities, and I see if I can catch the ball before it bounces a specified number of times within a defined space. I establish a

point system. I love playing wall ball! I tell my good friend how much fun I have playing wall ball, and he joins me. We develop our skills, play tense and competitive games, and deeply enjoy our encounters. Our friends hear about wall ball and want to watch, but we decide to make them pay for the pleasure of being spectators. Now we are professional wall ballers! We are admired. We establish a league. More people want to watch . . . According to Suits and many others, it makes no sense to ask whether wall ball, as such, is a playful activity, since it depends on participants' attitudes. Was wall ball transformed into "work" as soon as I was paid? Suppose that I was extremely happy to be paid for playing wall ball, grateful that I could play my game for money, and hopeful that I could continue to play and that I never lost my love for the game. In fact, my attitudes could be quite complex. My desires could be characterized as conditional or hypothetical. I am happy to be paid for playing wall ball, but I would play even if I did not get paid.

Consider another example, somewhat closer to home. My job is to teach and engage in philosophy. As an undergraduate I received no compensation for this. As a graduate student I received a stipend to study and teach. At one point philosophy became my job, my work, yet *doing* philosophy is, in an important sense, something I do for the immense satisfaction it gives me. It is valued as an end, despite the fact that the activity can also be characterized instrumentally. It is something I would continue to do whether or not I am paid to do it. My motives are mixed; my attitudes are complex.<sup>23</sup>

Play is attitudinally more complex than Suits and others seem to think. Consider another aspect of this complexity. Wall ball, like other games, is strictly conventional. It is made-up. Its rules are imaginative constructions that are the conditions for a certain kind of activity to occur, that is, conditions for playing wall ball. It is not work, art, science, religion, poetry, war, or anything else. As Huizinga says, "It's not 'ordinary' or 'real' life. It is rather a stepping out of 'real' life into a temporary sphere of activity with a

disposition all of its own.” He is talking about play. I am talking about wall ball as a form of play. Huizinga continues by giving the example of the young child playing “trains,” pretending that chairs are something else than “real life,” and urging Daddy to act accordingly. He says, “This ‘only pretending’ quality of play betrays a consciousness of the inferiority of play compared with ‘seriousness,’ a feeling that seems to be something as primary as play itself.” Here I would speak of a distinctive attitude toward playful activities. They are not “serious,” yet they can be wholly absorbing and engaged in quite seriously. I have called such an attitude “serious nonseriousness.”<sup>24</sup> Even professional athletes are sometimes pushed in times of crisis to admit the “nonserious” character of their activity. A young Major League Baseball pitcher is killed in a car crash. One of his teammates sadly comments, “This is real life, not baseball.” The attitude taken by the professional baseball player is essentially related to the form or structure of the activity, as if such an attitude is appropriate because baseball, as such, is not “real life.” Play is structurally nonserious.

One other element of attitudinal complexity is important. When the scientist is asked why the bears play, he says, “Because it’s fun.” We may not be sure about bear phenomenology, but when we consider the play of children and adults, when we think of our youthful and grown-up play, it is natural to speak of fun, joy, enjoyment, or satisfaction. Brown says his miserable golfers did not feel the “playful, out-of-time, in-the-zone, doing-it-for-its-own-sake *sensation* [emphasis added] that accompanies joyful playfulness.” The pleasure of play, however, is not like the pleasure of sensations in which we take delight—the pleasurable sounds, tastes, smells, and feel of ordinary experiences, such as the pleasurable sensation of orgasm. Fred Feldman’s recent defense of hedonism makes explicit what has been implicit in important historical accounts of the value and kinds of pleasure, including Epicurus’s account of the good life. Feldman distinguishes sensory pleasure and attitudinal pleasure. Sensory pleasures are feelings, that is, pleasurable sen-

sations. Attitudinal pleasures need not be felt. “A person takes attitudinal pleasure in some state of affairs if he enjoys it, is pleased by it, is glad that it is happening, is delighted by it.” Feldman gives the example of a person being pleased by the fact that there are no wars going on in the world. I may be pleased by Barack Obama’s being elected president, or I may enjoy the company of a good friend. Attitudinal pleasures are intentional, and they need not have the “feel” of sensations. “We know we have them not by sensation, but in the same way (whatever it may be) that we know when we believe something, or hope for it, or fear that it might happen.”<sup>25</sup> (These are propositional attitudes.)

For many, sport is a rich source of attitudinal pleasure. It was for me. It is also clear that there is a close relationship between enjoying an activity and desiring to engage in it for its own sake. If we add that certain kinds of activities are such that their form or structure occasions an attitudinal recognition of being set apart from “real life,” then we have arrived at a more complex attitudinal account of play, whose elements may have an equal claim in locating or categorizing an activity as play. Why shouldn’t we take the attitudinal recognition of the conventional nature of certain kinds of activities as sufficient for play? But now more needs to be said about the formal or structural elements in play activities. Whatever other motives or attitudes a person might have, if an activity is enjoyed, attitudinally recognized as not “real life,” and intrinsically attractive, regardless of other motives, then there are good reasons to categorize it as play—independent of whether a person is also being paid to perform the activity.

### *c. Play as Form or Structure*

The emphasis on form or structure redirects our attention to features of the activity itself rather than the subjectivity of the player. It also makes way for an approach that emphasizes relational elements or the interplay between subjectivity and features of the activity. The emphasis on form or structure—here, lack of form or

structure—first appeared in the description of animal behavior and children’s play as improvisational and spontaneous rather than mechanical and determined. Suits distinguishes primitive play—the baby splashing water in the bathtub—and sophisticated play, which involves rules and the development of skills. Kenneth Schmitz categorizes play in terms of a continuum from the least formal to the most formal types: frolic, make-believe, sporting skills, and games. Play need not be formal, but it often is. It is especially the gamelike elements of formal play that are relevant when considering whether it is reasonable to claim that sports or games as such are play—despite the fact that Suits and others may believe such assertions are “ridiculous.” This is because it is plausible to claim, as Suits does, that “the elements of sport are essentially—although perhaps not totally—the same as elements of game.”<sup>26</sup>

Suits’s insightful and familiar account of the elements of playing games provides the basis for an emphasis on play as activity having a certain form or structure and the claim that sport as such is activity having this structure. First, games are means-ends activities; they have a structure in which means are related to ends in a specified manner. There are goals that may be described independently of the respective games, like a golf ball coming to rest in a cup, a basketball going through a hoop, a soccer ball entering a netted goal, or a football being carried beyond a certain point. But these goals may be brought about in a variety of ways. I may place the golf ball in the cup with my hand, climb a ladder to put the basketball through a hoop, and so forth. Games are developed when means are limited by specific rules that prescribe and proscribe the ways in which goals may be brought about, transforming prelusory goals (pregame goals) into lusory ends (ends intrinsic to the game), one of which is to win the game by achieving certain lusory goals. Since the means specified by the rules always rule out the most efficient way to achieve a prelusory goal, games are quite unlike real life, in which efficiency is often the hallmark of rationality. Hence, because of their structure, games do require an attitude that

allows for the injection of gratuitous difficulty into life simply for the sake of the occurrence of the activity itself. Suits summarizes the elements of playing games in the following definition: “To play a game is to attempt to achieve a specific state of affairs (*pre-lusory goal*), using only means permitted by rules (*lusory means*), where the rules prohibit use of more efficient in favor of less efficient means (*constitutive rules*), and where such rules are accepted just because they make possible such activity (lusory attitude). I also offer the following only approximately accurate, but more pithy, version of the above definition: Playing a game is the voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles.”<sup>27</sup>

To say, as Huizinga does, that play is not “ordinary” or “real life,” or to claim, as Roger Caillois does, that play is both “separate” and “unproductive,” is to acknowledge a formal or structural feature of play.<sup>28</sup> Formal play, by its very nature, is not instrumental, in the sense in which instrumentality is understood in everyday life. To say that play is “superfluous,” as Huizinga does, or to claim that playing games involves gratuitous difficulty or the overcoming of unnecessary obstacles, affirms the difference between a world of play, with its own meanings—its own requirements and delimitations of space or time—and ordinary life. To say that games are not “serious” is to equivocate, unless it is clear that nonseriousness may be a claim about either the structure of the activity or the attitude of the player. Caillois says, “The confused and intricate laws of ordinary life are replaced in this fixed space and for this given time, by precise, arbitrary, unexceptionable rules that must be accepted as such and that govern the correct playing of the game.”<sup>29</sup> When the professional baseball player speaks of death as a part of “real life” compared to baseball (not “real life”), he is recognizing the difference between ordinary means-ends activities in life and the structure of formal play, that is, the playing of games. Some play is improvisational and joyous; other forms of play express our attraction to gratuitous difficulty and the value we place on overcoming obstacles, even unnecessary ones. And many complex forms



of play may well involve both: bursts of speed, creative physical movements, and spontaneity within the limits of the rules of the game or activity.<sup>30</sup>

Suits ends one of his influential essays on sport, play, and game by referring to a *New Yorker* cartoon in which an angry golfer is saying something to his partner: “The caption reads, ‘Stop saying it’s just a game! Goddamit, it’s *not* just a game!’ And he is quite right. For him, golf is not play, and so it is not, therefore *just* a game.”<sup>31</sup> I would say that Suits’s comment misleadingly reduces play to activity defined merely in terms of an attitude, ignores the formal aspects of the game of golf that are relevant in determining its character as play, and diminishes the experiential complexity of the activity, which may also be relevant in our judgments about play. For me, the cartoon suggests that the golfer has a rather shallow appreciation of the playful possibilities that are available in the experience of playing golf—at least in this particular example. How are such possibilities described?

#### *D. Play as Meaningful Experience*

When we conceive of play as a certain kind of attitude that can be intentionally directed toward any kind of activity (object), or we think of play activity itself as having a certain form or structure, it is as if we are focusing on two poles or aspects of experience that are importantly related or whose interplay constitutes a richer account of play phenomena. For many descriptions of the features of play it is less misleading to speak of the lived experience of the player interacting with her environment or becoming experientially involved with something other than herself. When different aspects of play experience are described, at least some of these features are at the same time both formal elements of the activity and psychological features of the agent. To say that play is “uncertain,” as Caillois does, describes both the course of undetermined events and the experience of the tension of not knowing what will happen or who will win. For these approaches, a dualism that abstractly separates

subject and object is phenomenologically inadequate, although some features may seem to focus more on one aspect of playful involvement than another. In the following, I will mention various characteristics of play without taking the time to offer an extended analysis of each feature—which would require considerable space. My procedure illustrates the difference between a focus on attitude or state of mind, which subjectivizes play, and experiential properties that are occasioned by involvements that require an account of that with which one is involved or which cannot be reduced simply to states of mind. After mentioning various characteristics, I will refer to some lists of properties, including Huizinga's (as we have seen) and Caillois's, to make the discussion more manageable.

First, here are some features of play that have been emphasized and analyzed in the expansive literature on the subject: play is activity characterized by freedom, separateness, nonseriousness, illusion, unreality, delimitation of space and time, isolation, purposelessness, order, make-believe, a play world, superfluousness, suspension of the ordinary, internal or intrinsic meaning, inherent attraction, unalienated participation, internal purposiveness, serious nonseriousness, diminished consciousness of self, unselfing, absorption, responsive openness, attunement, experience of difficulty, overcoming obstacles, risk taking, finitude, narrative structure, unity, contingency, possibility, uncertainty, spontaneity, improvisation—and fun. I am sure I have not exhausted the possibilities!

Recall Huizinga's summary definition in which each part is significant and analyzed at some length. Huizinga insists that all "play means something," and later states, "We shall try to take play as the player himself takes it: in its primary significance." When we attend to the experience of play, parsimonious descriptions are impossible because of the experiential richness of these activities. The freedom of play is both attitudinal, in which a player deeply enjoys engaging in such activities, and experiential, in which involvement with a wholly conventional play world separates a player from the cares of ordinary life. The experience of "secluded-

ness,” “isolation,” or even “tension” is the experience of structure, and it is attitudinally significant. “Experience” describes the abundant unity of meaningful activity (movement) and valuable intentional attitudes. Likewise, Caillois’s list of the essential properties of play is best interpreted as an attempt to describe the essential experiences involved in the playing of games: play is free (not obligatory), separate (limited in space and time), uncertain (outcomes are not determined in advance and are due to players’ innovations), unproductive (no new goods are created), governed by rules (conventional suspension of ordinary norms), and make-believe (an awareness of the unreality of the play world).<sup>32</sup>

Although Stuart Brown claims at one point in his interesting recent book that play is a “state of mind,” when he initially and tentatively offers a “foundational definition” of play, in large part for heuristic reasons, the properties he mentions richly combine claims about movement, attitude, structure, and experience. Here are the properties he lists, along with a brief description of each:

- apparently purposeless (done for its own sake)
- voluntary (“not obligatory or required by duty”)
- inherent attraction (“It’s fun. It makes you feel good. . . . It’s a cure for boredom.”)
- freedom from time (“When we are fully engaged in play, we lose a sense of the passage of time.”)
- diminished consciousness of self (“We stop worrying about whether we look good or awkward, smart or stupid. . . . We are fully in the moment, in the zone.”)
- improvisational potential (“We aren’t locked into a rigid way of doing things. We are open to serendipity, to change. . . . The result is that we stumble upon new behaviors, thoughts, strategies, movements, or ways of being.”)
- continuation desire (“We desire to keep doing it, and the pleasure of the experience drives the desire. We find ways to keep it going. . . . And when it is over, we want to do it again.”)<sup>33</sup>

Parts of Brown's list of properties are quite familiar after having considered briefly the seminal accounts of play found in Huizinga and Caillois. Some of the properties add additional or even new insights when we consider the experiential richness of play. The absorption described by Huizinga becomes "diminished consciousness of self" as players are fully involved in the activity of cycling, windsurfing, tennis, and the like. Improvisational potential connects the frolic of animals and children to the openness and free play of possibilities in rule-governed play. The category of improvisation describes the phenomenology of movement, a certain kind of kinesthetic freedom. Continuation desire is connected to attitudinal pleasure and the structure of repetition emphasized by Huizinga: "In this faculty of repetition lies one of the most essential qualities of play."<sup>34</sup> Games begin, are played out, even end, only to be repeated by players who want to continue playing, over and over. When Brown speaks of freedom from time, the language is experiential rather than structural. Time is experienced differently because the time internal to the game—due to the way that the game is temporally articulated according to rules—is often quite different from ordinary clock time. Play time starts and stops, speeds up and slows down, extends limitlessly, or is extinguished. Or, when we are absorbed in the activity, "in the moment," we lose our sense of the flow of time even when the activity itself is not articulated in terms of innings, periods, quarters, and so on.

A final approach to play deserves to be mentioned because the notion of play as meaningful experience, which unifies the different approaches to play as activity, attitude, and form, may be a derivative notion, dependent on an ontologically distinctive account of play that makes experiential accounts metaphorical rather than literal.

#### *E. Play as an Ontologically Distinctive Phenomenon*

In *Truth and Method*, Hans-Georg Gadamer is not primarily interested in the concept of play. He is centrally concerned with the

question of truth and understanding in the human sciences. He attempts to give an account of hermeneutical consciousness that describes the proper role of the historicity of existence in human understanding. Gadamer's discussion of play is merely a moment in his attempt to provide an analysis of aesthetic experience, an analysis that itself is a part of his monumental account of an experience of truth that cannot be reduced to scientific methods of understanding. Gadamer says, "The experience of the work of art includes understanding, and thus represents a hermeneutical phenomenon—but not at all in the sense of a scientific method."<sup>35</sup> His account of play is, however, significant.

Gadamer claims that play has its own mode of being and that play cannot be explained simply in terms of the subjectivity of the player. "Play has its own essence, independent of the consciousness of those who play." Gadamer argues that play is analogous to the way in which a work of art is fulfilled in the aesthetic experience of a spectator and is the real "subject" of the experience. Play requires a player with a certain attitude in order to come into being, but play is not reducible to the player's attitude; "play merely reaches presentation (*Darstellung*) through the players." For Gadamer, when we attend to apparently metaphorical usages of "play," when we speak of the play of light, waves, or natural forces, "what is intended is to-and-fro movement that is not tied to any goal which would bring it to an end." It is a mistake to think that these usages are figurative whereas our references to human or animal play are literal. The subject of play is play itself, not the subjectivity of the player. "Play clearly represents an order in which the to-and-fro movement of play follows of itself. It is part of play that the movement is not only without goal or purpose, but also without effort." The experience of freedom from the strains of ordinary life is the result of play playing itself through the player. "The structure of play absorbs the player into itself, and thus frees him from the burden of taking the initiative, which constitutes the actual strain of existence." For Gadamer, the mode of being of play is a "pure self-

representation.” Nature, in its unceasing, purposeless movement, renewing itself in “constant repetition,” also exemplifies the being of mobility as self-representation. “Thus in this sphere it becomes finally meaningless to distinguish between literal and metaphorical usage.”<sup>36</sup>

If Gadamer’s approach seems unduly opaque and metaphysically obscure, consider the claim that his approach to play helps clarify the “playful character of the contest.” For those who deny that contests or competitive games can be play, he reminds us that “through the contest arises the tense to-and-fro movement from which the victor emerges, and thus the whole becomes a game.”<sup>37</sup> Gadamer’s ontological approach clarifies the ordinary view that players (or spectators, for that matter) can develop a love or respect for “the game” as an independent phenomenon that is, in a sense, larger than the players, just as aesthetic appreciation or aesthetic experience recognizes the autonomy of a work of art standing over against the aesthetic consciousness as a demanding and authoritative presence.<sup>38</sup> The game or the work of art constitutes a reality in itself. “In cases where human subjectivity is what is playing, the primacy of the game over the players engaged in it is experienced by the players themselves in a special way.” Gadamer’s comment reflects the development of our discussion of the metaphysics of play, in which the subjective approach to play is corrected by references to form or structure. Gadamer’s remarks ring true, both phenomenologically and ontologically, when he comments that the “attraction of a game, the fascination it exerts, consists precisely in the fact that the game masters the players.” The player gives herself over to the game, or, if there is some dispute about speaking of a “game” in terms of the development of certain sporting skills, the player is taken up by her enjoyable experience of confronting gratuitous difficulties (or unnecessary obstacles). When the game is played, the “real subject of the game . . . is not the player, but instead the game itself. What holds the player in its spell, draws him into play, and keeps him there is the game itself.” Attitudes

are intentionally related to the nature of the task required for playing the game. “One can say that performing a task successfully ‘presents it’ (stellt sie dar).” Hence, we again arrive at the notion that playing games (or overcoming unnecessary obstacles), insofar as they are purposeless, that is, ends in themselves, shows that “play is really limited to presenting itself. Thus its mode of being is self-presentation.”<sup>39</sup>

Gadamer summarizes his approach to play: “We have seen that play does not have its being in the player’s consciousness or attitude, but on the contrary play draws him into its dominion and fills him with its spirit. The player experiences the game as a reality that surpasses him.” Gadamer affirms the supposedly “ridiculous” notion that sport, as such, conceived broadly as game playing (in Suits’s own sense), is play, ontologically interpreted as presenting itself in the tasks defined by the “make-believe goals of the game,” in Gadamer’s words.<sup>40</sup> Gadamer’s account of play returns us to the first approach or moment in our discussion, when play is taken to be behavior or action, some observable natural phenomenon characterized, much as Gadamer describes, as spontaneous and purposeless “to-and-fro movement.” The scientist then explains the phenomena biologically or in terms of neural development, the social scientist or humanist explains it in human terms, and we are led, dialectically, down a path that leads to Gadamer’s interpretation of the original phenomena, in which play is “decentered” and taken to be ontologically distinctive, manifested in and through natural events, animals, children, and adults.<sup>41</sup>

Now we are in a position to bring these approaches together in order to offer some conclusions about the nature of play, its relation to sport, and its value and role in a good human life.

### III. Play, Pluralism, and Good Lives

We began our discussion by attending to some of Bernard Suits’s “words on play.” Suits, always playfully provocative, voiced suspicions about attempts “to find play under nearly every rock in the

social landscape,” expressed doubts about those who make so much of the notion, offered his own attempt to place strict boundaries on the concept, and acknowledged that figurative uses of the word *play* force us to explain the relevant similarities and differences involved when we speak of the “play of light,” the “playful dog,” “child’s play,” “playing a game,” and “playing professional sports.” The upshot of our examination of approaches to play is evident. It is no wonder that play is found under nearly every rock in the social landscape, given the multiplicity of possible approaches and the legitimacy of each to tell us something important, even if incomplete, about the concept of play. Each approach picks out relevant properties generated by taking a certain descriptive or explanatory perspective on play phenomena. Each may claim to be a total account of play only by ignoring the legitimacy of other perspectives. Because of the plurality of the ways we can approach play, each should be taken to be a significant contribution to a nonreductive account of play.

The new prophets of play, Brown, Ackerman, and others, attempt to rouse us out of the doldrums of ordinary existence by awakening (or reawakening) in us moments of joy, exuberance, creativity, spontaneity, freedom, optimism, and fun—often associated with activities that are usually a part of early life but somehow get lost along the way. In attempting to enliven us to the possibilities of playful experience, they connect play to a notion of a good human life. Recall the initial comments by McGinn, Brown, and Ackerman. McGinn’s comments on play are secondary; they arise in an intellectual memoir that is robust and confessional about the role of sports and games in his life, from childhood and adolescence through adulthood: marbles, trampolining, diving, pole vaulting, table tennis, bowling, pinball, fishing, squash, running, video games, lifting weights, skiing, kayaking, windsurfing, and tennis! Of course sport is play, he tells us. Brown and Ackerman are most interested in play, not sport, yet both assume in some of their comments that sporting activities are playful activities. Sport should be



placed in the context of play and living well—joyously, freely, creatively. They call us to the possible enchantment of moments of our lives, when we are captivated by the absorbing activities that enable us to transcend everyday life, to “suspend the ordinary,” as Kenneth Schmitz described the “essence” of play.<sup>42</sup>

So, is sport an expression of play? Should we understand sport in terms of the concept of play? As far as I can tell, there are two primary reasons given for resisting the relationship, one of which we have already examined. Both avenues of criticism claim that sport may be infected by desires that are incompatible with play. Many claim, as Suits does, that play for pay is not really play, that professional sport is instrumental rather than autotelic. As we have seen, this view falls prey to the problem of mixed motives and involves the reduction of play to attitudinal considerations, ignoring the relevance of other properties, both structural and experiential. Activities may be characterized in complex ways, and the rejection of professional sport as play on attitudinal grounds hides the ways in which such activities have playlike properties. Moreover, even if Suits and others are right about the dissociation of professional sport and play, in numerous instances in which people play sports, the activities embody many properties that are associated with play: freedom, separateness, absorption, purposelessness, and so on.

The other avenue of criticism stresses the role of the desire to win in sports, rather than the extent to which sporting activities may be infected by elements that make sports one’s work or profession. Suits also argues that the compulsion to win, even for supposed amateurs like Olympic athletes, is incompatible with the notion that play must be engaged in as an end in itself. The stronger version of this criticism comes from Alfie Kohn, who insists that *any* desire to win, not simply an overarching compulsion, disqualifies an activity from being play. For Kohn, play and competition are incompatible. Since sport, by its very nature, involves competition, sport and play are incompatible. Because play involves

the familiar idea of choosing an activity for its own sake, play can have “no goal other than itself.” Competition is rule governed, often extrinsically motivated (by the desire for social approval), and goal oriented (a product orientation), rather than being a “process orientation.” Therefore, because sport is competitive, “sports never really qualified as play in the first place. Although it is not generally acknowledged, most definitions of play do seem to exclude competitive activities.”<sup>43</sup>

Kohn is undoubtedly correct to emphasize the dangers of competition, and the metaphor he uses is apt: “Clearly competition and play tug in two different directions. If you are trying to win, you are not engaged in true play.”<sup>44</sup> Yet there is more insight in his view when he resorts to metaphor than when he engages in essentialist pronouncements. There is no essence of play. If we recognize the multiplicity of relevant considerations involved when we attempt to understand play phenomena, we should resist Kohn’s view that play can be neither competitive nor rule governed. To say that play cannot be rule governed seems to reduce playful activities to frolic. However, there are more or less formal modes of play that many have pointed out. Rules may be formulated to create noncompetitive games (leapfrog) or games in which there is an internal goal (winning) sought by participants if they intend to engage in the activity. To say that play cannot be “goal oriented” either reduces it to frolic or equivocates on the notion of the “goal” of the activity in question. Certainly, playing a game, attempting to overcome unnecessary obstacles, or freely confronting gratuitous difficulty may be engaged in for the sake of the activity, even if the activity has an internal end that cannot be shared by the victor and the vanquished. Also, overcoming obstacles within the game means that sport, construed as game playing or skills development, is “goal oriented.” The process itself has internal products. The process may or may not also have extrinsic motives, but those considerations must be placed along with others that count for or against our judgment about the way to categorize certain activities.

In the end, if we are reminded of the multiple approaches to play and the varieties of usages, both literal and figurative, that are involved when we refer to the concept of play, we are left with a framework within which to sort out relevant similarities and differences when we speak in terms related to play. I do not think that a pluralist account of play leaves things too open-ended, nor do I think that there are no constraints on what we call play. No doubt such an account does leave things more messy than Suits's essentialism suggests, but that is because of the complexity of the phenomena and the nature of the concept of play. Given what we have said about the variety of approaches to play, the fecundity of play phenomena, and the connection between play and a good human life, we should reinforce, whenever it is appropriate, the notion that sport is found in the neighborhood of play. And we should do this in order to encourage the enchanting possibilities of sport, play, and life itself. When we find that sport has strayed from its natural home, we must encourage the wayward child to come back from the world.