Being Played

Gadamer and Philosophy's Hidden Dynamic

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To my parents
David and Pamela Sampson
For their love, care and Christian example

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Foreword

Play is a serious business. A player who does not take the game seriously is a spoilsport. No-one wants to play with a spoilsport – 'You're not taking it seriously!'. Even if one plays by oneself (as in solitaire), there must be a degree of seriousness, or there is no point in playing. And yet one plays for amusement, for pleasure, for the joy of play – the non-serious, precisely. There is a curious relationship between the serious and the non-serious at work (or at play) in play. This distinguishes play from work, which is all serious: any play at work in work is a diversion from the work, not an inherent part of it. In order to hold the dichotomy between the serious and the non-serious in play in play, the player must lose himself in the play. But if the player loses himself, then his lack of self-consciousness means that he is the last person we should consult if we want to know what the player knows in playing. All the best players are intuitive.

Thought of in this way, play looks a lot like art. Or, rather, art, if thought of in terms of play, ceases to be an object of aesthetic contemplation. To contemplate an art-work as an object (an object, precisely, of your contemplation – this is what an object is, a *thing* that is *thrown* at you, and which remains detached from you), you have to have taste. This is what Kant says. Taste is acquired, and it is acquired through learning and experience. It is educated. 'Educated taste' is a pleonasm: all taste is educated by definition. It is significant, too, that the development of taste coincides with the rise of the Enlightenment. If one thinks of art that is in poor taste, then one thinks of the art of modernity either preceding or succeeding the Enlightenment: dictator chic (the baroque of Versailles, Hitler's watercolours, Stalinist socialist realism) or its popular-consumer-capitalist imitations (a baroque chandelier hanging in a council flat; chav chic). In fact, good taste and poor taste are not true antinomies: from the point of view of taste (which is to say, from *within* taste), there is only taste or the tasteless. 'Good taste' is also a pleonasm.

The task, then, is to think of art from outside the paradigm of taste. Play is the space in which we can do that. In play, the player loses himself in the play. In art, the artist loses himself in the art. So, we cannot understand an art-work by asking the artist. The *being played* trumps the player when it comes to interpreting the game, and *being art* trumps the artist in interpreting art. But this looks like mere assertion by analogy: 'art is just like play'. Gadamer's achievement in *Truth and Method* is to demonstrate that, through having a shared structure, play and art have a shared ontology, a shared *mode of being*. In play, the game remains constant; it is the players who are mutable. Chess is

chess and soccer is soccer, regardless of the particular instantiations of the game in particular games played. The game as such – in its essence – is a human artefact, but it has an ideal existence that transcends the human players who act out particular games (and this is what all games have in common, which is where Gadamer departs in his interest in games from Wittgenstein, who was interested in how they differ). Meanwhile, an art-work – be it a symphony, a painting or a play – remains a transcendental constant in its essence regardless of the numerous playings of the symphony, reproductions of the painting, or performances of the play (which is why the art market, in its monetary valuation of the original score, painting or manuscript, constitutes a perverse fetishisation of the material object).

But this is still just an analogy! Art is like play in that it shares a structure of transcendent constancy in the face of its mutable instantiations by its various performers. But we want to go further: we want to say that the structures of art and of play respectively are not merely *like* one another, but are *shared*, to the extent that one cannot think art without thinking play, and *vice versa*. There is a clue in the shared language of the two spheres of activity: a symphony is *played*; a performed drama is a *play* and the actors are *players*; while a good game is *dramatic*. There is a clue, too, in the concept of *acting*. To act is both to *perform* an action and to *play* a part. *Acting* either brings something about and thus transforms an object or situation (as in, 'It's time to act!', or 'Act now!'), or it transforms the person who is acting (an Acting Head of Department temporarily gains a mantle the actor previously did not have; an actor on stage or in a film is temporarily transformed into someone else). The second of these alternatives is of more interest, since it reveals that acting is being in a state of play: in acting, a person must be lost to the persona, just as in play the player must be lost to the game. But there is an essential difference: in play, the loss of the player to the game affects the player, but in acting, the loss of the actor to the character affects the spectator. In performing an action, an object is transformed (a spectator may or may not witness this), but in playing a part, both the actor and the spectator are transformed. This may look as if we are reducing art to mere drama but, on the contrary, art is revealed to have an affective quality through its being play(ed): all art is not merely presentation, but *re*presentation. In art (any art, not just the dramatic), an actor loses himself in (the) play, and in so doing transfers his transformation to the spectator (reader, audience etc.) by *representing* a state of affairs. In the ontology of art, then, representation is more primordial than presentation.

The joy of art, meanwhile, lies in recognition. But just as consciousness (cognition) is consciousness *of* something, so recognition is recognition *of* something. That something is something we have known already (otherwise it

wouldn't be *re*cognition). We recognise a work of art as being a work of art because we recognise in it something about the state of being human with which we are already familiar. Let's call this phenomenon 'truth'. A true work of art is a work of art that bespeaks the truth. Only a philistine would consider this a truism.

This is the truth of being played. As Gadamer writes, 'In being presented in play, what is emerges'. Jeremy Sampson calls this the 'ludicity of being'. Hamlet famously tells Horatio that 'there are more things in heaven and earth... than are dreamt of in your philosophy'. Sampson cites this as an example of the 'undemonstrable questions of metaphysics', which 'dwell within ontological hiddenness'. The 'poetic word' enables us to experience the truth of what is hidden which, since it is beyond-the-world and not in-the-world, is not accessible through traditional metaphysics, be it of a rationalist or an empiricist hue. Audaciously, Sampson attempts to articulate – or, at least, attempts to describe how might be articulated – what the Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus* gave up on as 'thereof one must be silent'. This is achieved by a turn to a 'state of play' in philosophy, whereby the poetic voice speaks what is ontologically disclosed. The poetic voice is, of course, embodied in literature. The later Wittgenstein (or, more precisely, his followers such as Charles Altieri and Stanley Cavell) would say that literature *shows* what philosophy *says*. But Sampson says more: effectively, that literature *says* what philosophy cannot: 'The artwork', he writes, 'is that which is the play between "earth" and "world"'.

Sampson shows us this play at work in his reading of Puck's lines (in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*):

> If we shadows have offended
> Think on this and all is mended
> That you have but slumber'd here
> While these visions did appear.

Sampson asks, 'How is it possible that Puck can speak directly to the audience?'. The standard answer to this question – one that has been deployed by undergraduates in their exam answers for as long as I can remember – is that Puck (really, Shakespeare) is breaking down the 'fourth wall' between actor and audience. This is a philosophically productive answer insofar as it leads to speculation on the relationship between the literary trope of hypostasis (a fictional character becoming aware of their own fictionality), and hypostasis in the sense of reification (belief in an ideal construct). One hypostasis is on one side of the fourth wall and the other on the other side, and each challenges the other. Put simply, our 'suspension of

disbelief' is itself suspended in such cases, of which there is a long and noble tradition stretching through *Tristram Shandy* to Oliver Hardy looking into the camera. But seen in this way, Puck's gesture ultimately defeats literature, or at least, defeats what is literary (poetic, in Sampson's use of the term) about literature, substituting instead a particular form of scepticism towards literary possibility, which is why such readings, and such textual practices, are features of the postmodern and attractive to postmodernist critics.

Sampson, meanwhile, steers a different path, noticing that 'it is the instance of language that makes the experience real', and when Sampson speaks of language, he means not merely *the* language in which the text is couched (in this case, English), but poetic language in the Heideggerian sense of that in which man as the interpreting animal dwells – poetic language, that makes being understood. In this respect it is significant that Puck's words come at the end of the play – the 'postmodern' reading would work if Puck uttered his words at any time, just as Oliver Hardy looks at the camera at any point within a Laurel and Hardy movie. Puck's words release the spectator from the absorptive hold of the literary work. According to Gadamer, the spectator of a work of art is an active participant in the art's work: coming at the end of the play, Puck's words tell us that our work of playing is coming to its end. Now, just as *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is both fashioned from dreams (thanks to Puck's fairy dust) and is itself presented as a dream, so Puck's final words are an awakening ... into what? Into the univocity of Being, if we are to believe Heidegger.

Sampson guides us into considering the size of this 'if'. Like Freud's unconscious, the univocity of Being is not falsifiable, and therefore must be taken as an article of faith. However, merging Gadamer's aesthetics with Heidegger's ontology can provide a philosophically sound corrective to this. On the one hand, Gadamer's aesthetics give Heidegger's univocity of Being a material grounding: as an *Ereignis* (event), the play brings Being into view. On the other hand, Heidegger's univocity of Being gives Gadamer's aesthetics a purpose: artistic creations are not merely for detached contemplation, but are themselves ontological.

If the sense of an ending is crucial to being played in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, then in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and in Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* this is achieved from the outset. In the former this is not by a character addressing the audience, but rather by what Sampson calls 'Beckett's theatric empathy'. Since the play is shorn of all contextualisation, it becomes about waiting as such, and so the audience is constrained into investing in the friendship of Vladimir and Estragon. Their frustration and anxiety is our frustration and anxiety but, unlike them, we can serve as witness to their friendship which, as a constant, mitigates against the despair that many critics have discerned in the play. In *The Importance of Being*

Earnest, meanwhile, the audience's being played is achieved through the witnessing of players playing characters who are themselves playing characters – but in their own reality (within the play), rather than within a play. As Sampson puts it, 'While Beckett collapses the fictive and real worlds ... so that the fictive is experienced as real, Wilde imbues the real world with a strange fictivity that leaves the edifice of the real world intact but expressed in an engaging but unsettling fictive way'.

What all three plays (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Waiting for Godot*, and *The Importance of Being Earnest*) have in common is that they inhabit what Sampson calls 'the ludicity of Being'. This is captured by the subtitle of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, *A Trivial Comedy for Serious People*. Trivial comedy – play – is a serious matter. Sampson's achievement, through applying Gadamer's philosophy to rich readings of the exemplary plays, is to show us that the ludicity of Being mediates between the remembrance of the once forgotten and the renewal of experience. This is how our lives are played out.

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Introduction: Game Plan

> If we shadows have offended
> Think on this and all is mended
> That you have but slumber'd here
> While these visions did appear.[1]

Doubt is the recognition of uncertainty. Apparently, the audience that Puck addresses above are clearly uncertain about what they have witnessed to the point they are potentially angry at being wilfully deceived. Yet Shakespeare deliberately drops the theatrical 'fourth wall' to raise a fundamental philosophical question: How certain are we of what we know and who we are? This is not a new question but an ancient one.[2] Yet Shakespeare seems to ask it in a new way. In modern terms, are we being played? I have chosen the title of "Being played" because it intertwines three important strands of thought. Firstly, it seeks to question some of our ontological presuppositions, hopefully not in a relativistic or nihilistic way, but one that is positive and productive. Secondly, this title enables the exploration of the question of whether our sense of being is primarily manifested in static concepts or in a hidden dynamic of play akin to Hans Georg Gadamer's ludic theory. Finally, the title will explore the relationship between literature and philosophy, and especially drama. I maintain that it is this relationship that could be the key in Gadamer's words of winning back the "undemonstrable questions of metaphysics."[3]

Although the exploration of the relationship between literature and philosophy is not fundamentally new, in recent times[4] the use of Gadamer's ludic theory in uncovering the essential ontological presuppositions that are common to both is. I am also aware that there are those like Jacques Derrida who argued in his *Acts of Literature* that he maintains that philosophy and

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[1] W. Shakespeare *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (Act V Scene 1 lines 409 – 413) (London: Bloomsbury 2013).

[2] See Gadamer's later works – such as H-G Gadamer *The Beginning of Philosophy* (New York: International Publishing 1998).

[3] L. Hahn (ed) *The Philosophy of Hans Georg Gadamer* (Chicago: Open Court Publishing 1997), p39.

[4] C. Altieri *Reckoning with the Imagination: Wittgenstein and the Aesthetics of Literary Experience* (London: Cornell University 2015).

literature are clearly interwoven, often allows his preoccupation with otherness to run wild. Again, there will be those who would argue that poetry would be a more natural choice given Gadamer's interest in the poetic works of Celan, Rilke and George. In response, I argue that the primacy that Gadamer's gives to poetry is because the poem highlights vividly the contrast between literary and everyday language. Again, I would argue that to privilege one literary genre over others is a personal or a cultural choice and not a metaphysical absolute. Therefore, when Gadamer speaks of poetry being the "eminent" text, he is speaking of the poetics of literary language that re-acquaint us with its power to speak directly again to us.[5] Interestingly Gadamer often refers to aesthetics in explicitly religious terms; therefore, I feel I have a liberty to follow suit. Indeed, the plays I have chosen to explore in this study have been long argued to possess their own poetics and metaphysics, challenging and revitalizing our understanding of language and ontology. Furthermore, whenever Gadamer speaks of his ludic theory he invariably uses metaphors from drama and the theatre. Yet I will briefly later outline the significance of Gadamer's ludic theory to prose and poetry (with particular reference to Gerard Manley Hopkins and Jorge Luis Borges).

Such widespread relevance begins with one of the universally famous assertions of philosophy: "I think therefore I am"[6] found in Rene Descartes' *Discourse in Method (1637)*. Although it is certainly not regarded as infallible a priori for human existence as Descartes originally intended, it is for many a helpful starting point for philosophical inquiry. This assertion seems to assume that the 'I' to which Descartes refers and the 'thinking' that it does are singular, stable and undifferentiated. One of the earliest criticisms of Descartes' assertion is what if the 'I' referred to here is part of another being's dream[7]. What happens when that being awakes? Does the 'I' lose its 'existence'? Therefore, did the dreamt 'I' really ever exist? Yet the more intriguing question is what if the 'I' is the being who is dreaming about itself in the dream? As the 'I' dreams, is it not both the deceiver and the deceived of the dream? If so, the 'I' in this instance is not singular, stable and undifferentiated, but multiple, dynamic and differentiated. In short the 'I' is in a state of play.

This 'differentiated I' is not new. Nick Mansfield's book *Subjectivity: Theories of the Self from Freud to Haraway* provides a way of contextualizing

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[5] H-G Gadamer *The Relevance of the Beautiful and other Essays: On the Contribution of the Poetry to the Search of the Truth* (Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press 1998),105 – 115.

[6] R. Descartes *Discourse in Method* (Indianapolis USA: Hackett Publishing) 18.

[7] S. Palmquist *The Tree of Philosophy* (Hong Kong: Philopsychy Press 2000), 43.

the historical and current debates about the 'differentiated I' or the subject. Mansfield concludes:

> It would be reassuring to find answers to these questions, even though Western intellectual life – like so much of the West's thrilling yet gruesome history – is littered with discredited ultimate answers, ridiculed total theories and murderous final solutions. As Lyotard points out in his work on postmodernism, we should beware of the destructiveness of big answers, even if we have to pay the price of uncertainty and open-endedness in our debates.[8]

Although Mansfield's does not entirely agree with Lyotard's pessimistic assessment, he recoils into two possibilities relating to the narrative of the subjectivity debates being a cultural construct gradually evolving with every new generation or according to his reading of Heidegger, an arbitrary assertion of transcendental truth. Yet these options appear to affirm a weakened form of Descartes' cogito and its attendant problems in that they both appeal to a transcendent, omniscient self that transcends transcendental truth itself.

In 1739 David Hume in his *Treatise on Human Nature* challenged the apparent monopoly that reason possessed with regard to the self or the subject:

> In order to shew the fallacy of all this philosophy, I shall endeavour to prove first, that reason alone can never be a motive to any action of the will, and secondly, that it can never oppose passion in the direction of the will.[9]

According to Neil Sinhababu in his book *Humean Nature*, when Hume uses the word 'passion' he is referring to the idea of desire as shaping human judgements, which is a psychological claim. Sinhababu counters anti - Humean views that claim that desire is an exclusively mental state by arguing that hunger and lust go beyond the mind and possess provable physical states. [10] Although Sinhababu's revival of Humean nature is very helpful in breaking reason's monopoly on the explanation of the self, it is presented as a methodology whose psychological claims and the book's subtitle of "how

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[8] N. Mansfield *Subjectivity: Theories of the Self from Freud to Haraway* (New York: New York University Press 2000), 174.
[9] D. Hume *A Treatise of Human Nature* (Oxford UK: Oxford University Press 2000) 3.
[10] N. Sinhababu *Humean Nature: How desire explains action, thought and feeling* (Oxford UK: Oxford University Press 2017), 13.

desire explains action, thought and feeling" could arguably promote a rather misleading totalizing interpretation of the theory itself. Yet as Richard Kearney argues Hume was "to discover that once one divests reason of its metaphysical scaffolding and seeks to found it on a purely empirical basis, the very edifice of rationalism collapses into an arbitrary fictionalism".[11] As a result, Hume progressively moved to a position of profound scepticism in relation to the overarching claims of empiricism.

The book will challenge the assumption of the above Cartesian assertion that the thinking 'I' is singular, stable and undifferentiated but also challenge the assumptions of rationalism and empiricism as an unnecessarily restrictive ideological epistemology. Although rational and empirical knowledge are valid forms of epistemology, I would argue strongly that the aforementioned reflect a particularly restrictive ideological narrative. [12] This narrative is expressed in two forms: A.J. Ayer's Logical Positivism[13] and Richard Dawkins' Scientism. [14] Both expressions of this restrictive ideological epistemology are committed to the destruction of metaphysics as a legitimate form of knowledge. However, both Ayer and Dawkins' framework of thinking rest upon a fundamental contradiction. They both implicitly assert that only rational or empirical statements are meaningful. Yet the statement cannot be proved by rational or empirical means. Ironically, both revert to metaphysics to prop up their framework of thinking, thus offering evidence for John Lennox's assertion that "not all statements of scientists are statements of science". [15] Therefore, for Lennox, Ayer's Logical Positivism and Dawkins' Scientism is a case of the philosophical overreach. Lennox's insightful statement, indicates a profound paradox of on one hand, the limitations of rationalism and empiricism, but also on the other the irresistible desire to reach both into the past and our origins and towards the future and our destiny in order to attempt to make sense, in Gadamerian terms, of the totality of our existence.

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[11] R. Kearney *The Wake of the Imagination* (London: Routledge 1994) 163.

[12] R. Audi (ed.) *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy* (Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press 2015) 303 – 304 & 902 – 903. Audi highlights there are a number of forms of empiricism and rationalism respectively. However, for the purposes of this study I will define empiricism and rationalism as seeking sensory and logical proof. It is unfortunate that these two branches of philosophy have undeservedly tarnished by their association with A.J. Ayer's Logical Positivism and Richard Dawkins' Scientism who have radicalized them into self- legitimizing forms of knowledge.

[13] A.J. Ayer *Truth, Language and Logic* (London: Penguin Books 1987)

[14] R. Dawkins *The Greatest Show on Earth* (London Transworld Publishers 2009)

[15] J. Lennox *God's Undertaker: Has Science Buried God?* (Oxford UK: Oxford University Press 2009) 18.

PAGES MISSING

FROM THIS FREE SAMPLE

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