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# Play

Sybrandt van Keulen

What does it take to apprehend how playing goes? Playing games seems to be about the only way to find out how even language games go, yet it is a mistake to think that the dynamics of inventing and performing play can be understood purely through doing games. Moreover, philosophy of play is anything but game theory.

Immanuel Kant's famous conception of play might function as an opening gambit. Distancing himself from the tradition of the *je ne sais quoi*, a tradition emerging from Gottfried W. Leibniz's *Monadology* and revolving around the epistemological status of so-called confused perceptions and ideas (see also Kaiser 2011, 17), Kant argues the following: Although it is not of the order of knowing what sets our powers of cognition into play, the related state of mind has everything to do with an undeniable "feeling of life" (*Lebensgefühl*; Kant 2000, § 1). To understand how this force touches us, we should not so much heed *what* exactly affects us but rather perceive that this "élan" (*Belebung*; § 9) is an effect of a particular "relation between those powers to each other" (§ 9). With this "free play of the powers of representation" (§ 9) a specific reciprocal relationship is meant: a relationship in which **powers** are brought to swing and thus play with each other.

104 To be able to weigh Kant's words "free" and "power," it should be pointed out that we are not dealing in any case with a power-free relationship. However, the way those powers or forces interact with each other could be called free of domination, with the specification that "free" does not mean an *absence* but rather a certain *dynamical distribution* of dominance: None of those powers should dominate in a static, autocratic sense; they are engaged in a complex drama and, until the final showdown, so to speak, they should remain evenly matched. This implies that the particular feeling the action of playing brings about is intertwined with duration, that it is not similar to an immediate **affect**, moreover, that it is not controlled by any particular instant profit. It may be noted that the energy that nourishes the playful *élan* for a significant extent, is drawn from the deferral of a final closure. One could speak of a successfully executed **process** of unbalance and rebalance, as long as pleasure lingers.

Now I have touched upon some dynamical aspects of playing, attention could be given to a few characteristics of the force that sets up the playground. In one way or another we talk about a force that establishes the necessary confines to let that specific *élan* happen, or which operates as supervisory authority of constitutive contours. In this respect the words "free" and "power" acquire their full meaning. In Kantian parlance the idea of a well-tempered free play can only take place within the limits of an arena carefully designed by the supervisory power of reason. This Kantian use of "free" comes close to the English meaning of "fair": free from self-interest, prejudice, or favoritism (Merriam-Webster dictionary).

Free play and the limiting force of reason are two sides of the same coin. According to Kant playing any game can only be pleasurable – that is, rewarding in the lively activity itself – if the intended relationship is not determined by any partiality. The implied supervision of reason resides in her assumed exclusive arbitral power to keep the actions of the playing parties within required limits. This could be called the condition of

unconditionality, with reason as its sole superintendent. Free play has to do with a state of affairs that cannot be effectuated in one go, which is perhaps why reason cannot do anything else but meticulously repeat itself in her limitative activity. However, play equals the sense of going on *without end*, animation forever.

Kant has a keen eye for a variety of powers, such as intuition, productive imagination, and spirit (*Geist, esprit*), producing the wealth of life, yet he also strongly suggests that he is terrified of those powers embodied in one source named *genius* that sets free a poetico-**metaphorical** overabundance; a confusing waver, perhaps for Kant's feeling even potentially a threatening power – like a swarm of bees – that requires censorship and containment. As soon as the reasonable Self fears no longer being able to maintain his lofty arbitral position, being as it appears overwhelmingly surrounded by at least equally powerful forces, the sharing game *needs* to end. The power of genius turns out to give Kant the impression of a dangerous, because unsubduable, anarchistic source of “lawless freedom, nothing but nonsense”; it therefore should be brought “in line with the understanding” by “clipping its wings and making it well behaved or polished”; hence, “if anything must be sacrificed in the conflict of the two properties in one product, it must rather be on the side of genius” (§ 50). In the end genius seems to impel the fellow player from before, so-called understanding (with the power of reason in the background, because the collaboration of understanding and reason goes per definition *without play*) to a unilateral, eliminatory intervention. That is to say, a crucial proof of incapacity with regard to the power of reason seems to be that reason *itself* is unable to take part in a reciprocal, playful relationship without end or purpose. Playing *according* the rules of reason – so the command seems – and not playing *with* them. Gradually framed by reason's drive for mastery, the character or persona called genius is endowed with a subordinate role in a *logocentric configuration* – finally genius is stripped of any access (which is an excess in Kant's perspective) to political ruling power.

106 To what end? What else could there be in and beyond the game of reason?

Michel Foucault's analysis of the agonistic structure of the classical Greek erotics of the fourth century B.C.E. provide the terms required to problematize the consequences outlined above. Foucault's aim is not forging universally valid imperatives in order to curtail efflorescent unilateral power, he rather wants to provide an understanding of the stakes of "the purposeful art of a freedom perceived as a power game" (1990, 253). The complexity of this game is based on the reciprocal dynamics of an "elliptical configuration" (203) comprising two parties that are both becoming the centers of a "possible conversion – an ethically necessary and socially useful one – of the bond of love (doomed to disappear) into a relation of friendship, of *philia*" (201). The purpose of this rocking game seems apparently not a state of dominance of one party over the other but rather a permanent exercise in self-mastery combined with a certain care for the other. The principle of regulation should be sought in the relation itself, in "a sharing of thoughts and existence, mutual benevolence," culminating in "cultivation of indestructible friendship" (201). The point at issue can clearly be understood as critical towards the Kantian framework of reason, because it is not "... the sense of measure that one brings to one's own power, but the best way to measure one's strength against the power of others while ensuring one's own mastery over oneself ..." (212). Foucault's findings imply a critical stance in particular with regard to Kant's unilateral view on political power: In Foucault's mind good governance up to the highest level should take the shape of elliptical relationships.

As appealing Foucault's ideal of indestructible friendship might be, it is at the same time only a fraction less problematic as Kant's lofty game of reason. In order to understand *any* friendship as deconstructable, two questions of Derrida in his reading of Kant – also with regard to the consensus between reason and genius I already referred to above – seem relevant:

What can deeply bind the two opposing parties and procure for them a neutral ground of reconciliation for speaking together again in a fitting tone? In other words, what do they together exclude as the inadmissible itself? (Derrida 1999, 142).

In the case of the Greek friendship the inadmissible is evidently feminine: women did not have access to political governance. Yet in order to preserve the value of the notion of “configuration,” this binding structure could be critically understood as a relationship without *one* end, referring to both hetero- and homosexual relations, and relations from another nature, yet unknown to us. The critical impulse, which gets hegemonic power relations at play, cannot be single – neither exclusively human, nor miraculous or accidental. Thus the sense of the notion of end comes to the fore as an opportunity to problematize the difference between closure and end. The activity of play could effectively happen under the condition that the so-called “neutral” playground can never be regarded as a *fait accompli*. Hence, a play without cognitive certainty, a friendship without a determined goal, and admiration without one eschatological end: an “end without end” (168). The immediate art historical association could be *l'art pour l'art* or *Dada*, yet an extension of this association would be purposiveness in its daring multiplicity. The *telos* of deconstruction, assumed that there is one, would be then to both instigate and welcome *divining configurations* of perhaps even hazard games between so-called secular and religious players, to effectuate instances of timely and untimely suspension.

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