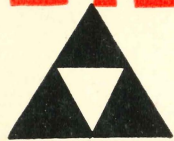
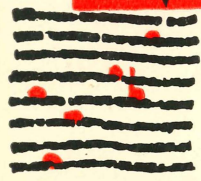
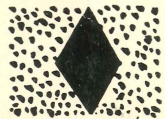




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*a study
of the
play element
in culture*

*johan
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HOMO LUDENS

A STUDY OF THE PLAY-ELEMENT
IN CULTURE

by
J. HUIZINGA



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TABLE OF CONTENTS

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE	vii
FOREWORD	ix
I NATURE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF PLAY AS A CULTURAL PHENOMENON	I
II THE PLAY-CONCEPT AS EXPRESSED IN LANGUAGE	28
III PLAY AND CONTEST AS CIVILIZING FUNCTIONS	46
IV PLAY AND LAW	76
V PLAY AND WAR	89
VI PLAYING AND KNOWING	105
VII PLAY AND POETRY	119
VIII THE ELEMENTS OF MYTHOPOIESIS	136
IX PLAY-FORMS IN PHILOSOPHY	146
X PLAY-FORMS IN ART	158
XI WESTERN CIVILIZATION <i>Sub Specie Ludi</i>	173
XII THE PLAY-ELEMENT IN CONTEMPORARY CIVILIZATION	195
INDEX	214

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NATURE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF PLAY AS A CULTURAL PHENOMENON

PLAY is older than culture, for culture, however inadequately defined, always presupposes human society, and animals have not waited for man to teach them their playing. We can safely assert, even, that human civilization has added no essential feature to the general idea of play. Animals play just like men. We have only to watch young dogs to see that all the essentials of human play are present in their merry gambols. They invite one another to play by a certain ceremoniousness of attitude and gesture. They keep to the rule that you shall not bite, or not bite hard, your brother's ear. They pretend to get terribly angry. And—what is most important—in all these doings they plainly experience tremendous fun and enjoyment. Such rompings of young dogs are only one of the simpler forms of animal play. There are other, much more highly developed forms: regular contests and beautiful performances before an admiring public.

Here we have at once a very important point: even in its simplest forms on the animal level, play is more than a mere physiological phenomenon or a psychological reflex. It goes beyond the confines of purely physical or purely biological activity. It is a *significant* function—that is to say, there is some sense to it. In play there is something “at play” which transcends the immediate needs of life and imparts meaning to the action. All play means something. If we call the active principle that makes up the essence of play, “instinct”, we explain nothing; if we call it “mind” or “will” we say too much. However we may regard it, the very fact that play has a meaning implies a non-materialistic quality in the nature of the thing itself.

Psychology and physiology deal with the observation, description and explanation of the play of animals, children, and grown-ups. They try to determine the nature and significance of play and to assign it its place in the scheme of life. The high importance of this place and the necessity, or at least the utility,

of play as a function are generally taken for granted and form the starting-point of all such scientific researches. The numerous attempts to define the biological function of play show a striking variation. By some the origin and fundamentals of play have been described as a discharge of superabundant vital energy, by others as the satisfaction of some "imitative instinct", or again as simply a "need" for relaxation. According to one theory play constitutes a training of the young creature for the serious work that life will demand later on. According to another it serves as an exercise in restraint needful to the individual. Some find the principle of play in an innate urge to exercise a certain faculty, or in the desire to dominate or compete. Yet others regard it as an "abreaction"—an outlet for harmful impulses, as the necessary restorer of energy wasted by one-sided activity, as "wish-fulfilment", as a fiction designed to keep up the feeling of personal value, etc.¹

All these hypotheses have one thing in common: they all start from the assumption that play must serve something which is *not* play, that it must have some kind of biological purpose. They all enquire into the why and the wherefore of play. The various answers they give tend rather to overlap than to exclude one another. It would be perfectly possible to accept nearly all the explanations without getting into any real confusion of thought—and without coming much nearer to a real understanding of the play-concept. They are all only partial solutions of the problem. If any of them were really decisive it ought either to exclude all the others or comprehend them in a higher unity. Most of them only deal incidentally with the question of what play is *in-itself* and what it means for the player. They attack play direct with the quantitative methods of experimental science without first paying attention to its profoundly aesthetic quality. As a rule they leave the primary quality of play as such, virtually untouched. To each and every one of the above "explanations" it might well be objected: "So far so good, but what actually is the *fun* of playing? Why does the baby crow with pleasure? Why does the gambler lose himself in his passion? Why is a huge crowd roused to frenzy by a football match?" This intensity of, and absorption in, play finds no explanation in biological analysis. Yet in this intensity, this absorption, this power of maddening, lies the very

¹For these theories see H. Zondervan, *Het Spel bij Dieren, Kinderen en Volwassen Menschen* (Amsterdam, 1928), and F. J. J. Buytendijk, *Het Spel van Mensch en Dier als openbaring van levensdriften* (Amsterdam, 1932).

essence, the primordial quality of play. Nature, so our reasoning mind tells us, could just as easily have given her children all those useful functions of discharging superabundant energy, of relaxing after exertion, of training for the demands of life, of compensating for unfulfilled longings, etc., in the form of purely mechanical exercises and reactions. But no, she gave us play, with its tension, its mirth, and its fun.

Now this last-named element, the *fun* of playing, resists all analysis, all logical interpretation. As a concept, it cannot be reduced to any other mental category. No other modern language known to me has the exact equivalent of the English "fun". The Dutch "aardigheid" perhaps comes nearest to it (derived from "aard" which means the same as "Art" and "Wesen"¹ in German, and thus evidence, perhaps, that the matter cannot be reduced further). We may note in passing that "fun" in its current usage is of rather recent origin. French, oddly enough, has no corresponding term at all; German half makes up for it by "Spas" and "Witz" together. Nevertheless it is precisely this fun-element that characterizes the essence of play. Here we have to do with an absolutely primary category of life, familiar to everybody at a glance right down to the animal level. We may well call play a "totality" in the modern sense of the word, and it is as a totality that we must try to understand and evaluate it.

Since the reality of play extends beyond the sphere of human life it cannot have its foundations in any rational nexus, because this would limit it to mankind. The incidence of play is not associated with any particular stage of civilization or view of the universe. Any thinking person can see at a glance that play is a thing on its own, even if his language possesses no general concept to express it. Play cannot be denied. You can deny, if you like, nearly all abstractions: justice, beauty, truth, goodness, mind, God. You can deny seriousness, but not play.

But in acknowledging play you acknowledge mind, for whatever else play is, it is not matter. Even in the animal world it bursts the bounds of the physically existent. From the point of view of a world wholly determined by the operation of blind forces, play would be altogether superfluous. Play only becomes possible, thinkable and understandable when an influx of *mind* breaks down the absolute determinism of the cosmos. The very existence of play continually confirms the supra-logical nature of the human

¹Nature, kind, being, essence, etc. Trans.

situation. Animals play, so they must be more than merely mechanical things. We play and know that we play, so we must be more than merely rational beings, for play is irrational.

In tackling the problem of play as a function of culture proper and not as it appears in the life of the animal or the child, we begin where biology and psychology leave off. In culture we find play as a given magnitude existing before culture itself existed, accompanying it and pervading it from the earliest beginnings right up to the phase of civilization we are now living in. We find play present everywhere as a well-defined quality of action which is different from "ordinary" life. We can disregard the question of how far science has succeeded in reducing this quality to quantitative factors. In our opinion it has not. At all events it is precisely this quality, itself so characteristic of the form of life we call "play", which matters. Play as a special form of activity, as a "significant form", as a social function—that is our subject. We shall not look for the natural impulses and habits conditioning play in general, but shall consider play in its manifold concrete forms as itself a social construction. We shall try to take play as the player himself takes it: in its primary significance. If we find that play is based on the manipulation of certain images, on a certain "imagination" of reality (i.e. its conversion into images), then our main concern will be to grasp the value and significance of these images and their "imagination". We shall observe their action in play itself and thus try to understand play as a cultural factor in life.

The great archetypal activities of human society are all permeated with play from the start. Take language, for instance—that first and supreme instrument which man shapes in order to communicate, to teach, to command. Language allows him to distinguish, to establish, to state things; in short, to name them and by naming them to raise them into the domain of the spirit. In the making of speech and language the spirit is continually "sparking" between matter and mind, as it were, playing with this wondrous nominative faculty. Behind every abstract expression there lie the boldest of metaphors, and every metaphor is a play upon words. Thus in giving expression to life man creates a second, poetic world alongside the world of nature.

Or take myth. This, too, is a transformation or an "imagination" of the outer world, only here the process is more elaborate and ornate than is the case with individual words. In myth,

primitive man seeks to account for the world of phenomena by grounding it in the Divine. In all the wild imaginings of mythology a fanciful spirit is playing on the border-line between jest and earnest. Or finally, let us take ritual. Primitive society performs its sacred rites, its sacrifices, consecrations and mysteries, all of which serve to guarantee the well-being of the world, in a spirit of pure play truly understood.

Now in myth and ritual the great instinctive forces of civilized life have their origin: law and order, commerce and profit, craft and art, poetry, wisdom and science. All are rooted in the primaeval soil of play.

The object of the present essay is to demonstrate that it is more than a rhetorical comparison to view culture *sub specie ludi*. The thought is not at all new. There was a time when it was generally accepted, though in a limited sense quite different from the one intended here: in the 17th century, the age of world theatre. Drama, in a glittering succession of figures ranging from Shakespeare and Calderon to Racine, then dominated the literature of the West. It was the fashion to liken the world to a stage on which every man plays his part. Does this mean that the play-element in civilization was openly acknowledged? Not at all. On closer examination this fashionable comparison of life to a stage proves to be little more than an echo of the Neo-platonism that was then in vogue, with a markedly moralistic accent. It was a variation on the ancient theme of the vanity of all things. The fact that play and culture are actually interwoven with one another was neither observed nor expressed, whereas for us the whole point is to show that genuine, pure play is one of the main bases of civilisation.

To our way of thinking, play is the direct opposite of seriousness. At first sight this opposition seems as irreducible to other categories as the play-concept itself. Examined more closely, however, the contrast between play and seriousness proves to be neither conclusive nor fixed. We can say: play is non-seriousness. But apart from the fact that this proposition tells us nothing about the positive qualities of play, it is extraordinarily easy to refute. As soon as we proceed from "play is non-seriousness" to "play is not serious", the contrast leaves us in the lurch—for some play can be very serious indeed. Moreover we can immediately name several other fundamental categories that likewise come under the heading "non-seriousness" yet have no correspondence whatever

with "play". Laughter, for instance, is in a sense the opposite of seriousness without being absolutely bound up with play. Children's games, football, and chess are played in profound seriousness; the players have not the slightest inclination to laugh. It is worth noting that the purely physiological act of laughing is exclusive to man, whilst the significant function of play is common to both men and animals. The Aristotelian *animal ridens* characterizes man as distinct from the animal almost more absolutely than *homo sapiens*.

What is true of laughter is true also of the comic. The comic comes under the category of non-seriousness and has certain affinities with laughter—it provokes to laughter. But its relation to play is subsidiary. In itself play is not comical either for player or public. The play of young animals or small children may sometimes be ludicrous, but the sight of grown dogs chasing one another hardly moves us to laughter. When we call a farce or a comedy "comic", it is not so much on account of the play-acting as such as on account of the situation or the thoughts expressed. The mimic and laughter-provoking art of the clown is comic as well as ludicrous, but it can scarcely be termed genuine play.

The category of the comic is closely connected with *folly* in the highest and lowest sense of that word. Play, however, is not foolish. It lies outside the antithesis of wisdom and folly. The later Middle Ages tended to express the two cardinal moods of life—play and seriousness—somewhat imperfectly by opposing *folie* to *sense*, until Erasmus in his *Laus Stultitiae* showed the inadequacy of the contrast.

All the terms in this loosely connected group of ideas—play, laughter, folly, wit, jest, joke, the comic, etc.—share the characteristic which we had to attribute to play, namely, that of resisting any attempt to reduce it to other terms. Their rationale and their mutual relationships must lie in a very deep layer of our mental being.

The more we try to mark off the form we call "play" from other forms apparently related to it, the more the absolute independence of the play-concept stands out. And the segregation of play from the domain of the great categorical antitheses does not stop there. Play lies outside the antithesis of wisdom and folly, and equally outside those of truth and falsehood, good and evil. Although it is a non-material activity it has no moral function. The valuations of vice and virtue do not apply here.

If, therefore, play cannot be directly referred to the categories of truth or goodness, can it be included perhaps in the realm of the aesthetic? Here our judgement wavers. For although the attribute of beauty does not attach to play as such, play nevertheless tends to assume marked elements of beauty. Mirth and grace adhere at the outset to the more primitive forms of play. In play the beauty of the human body in motion reaches its zenith. In its more developed forms it is saturated with rhythm and harmony, the noblest gifts of aesthetic perception known to man. Many and close are the links that connect play with beauty. All the same, we cannot say that beauty is inherent in play as such; so we must leave it at that: play is a function of the living, but is not susceptible of exact definition either logically, biologically, or æsthetically. The play-concept must always remain distinct from all the other forms of thought in which we express the structure of mental and social life. Hence we shall have to confine ourselves to describing the main characteristics of play.

Since our theme is the relation of play to culture we need not enter into all the possible forms of play but can restrict ourselves to its social manifestations. These we might call the higher forms of play. They are generally much easier to describe than the more primitive play of infants and young animals, because they are more distinct and articulate in form and their features more various and conspicuous, whereas in interpreting primitive play we immediately come up against that irreducible quality of pure playfulness which is not, in our opinion, amenable to further analysis. We shall have to speak of contests and races, of performances and exhibitions, of dancing and music, pageants, masquerades and tournaments. Some of the characteristics we shall enumerate are proper to play in general, others to social play in particular.

First and foremost, then, all play is a voluntary activity. Play to order is no longer play; it could at best be but a forcible imitation of it. By this quality of freedom alone, play marks itself off from the course of the natural process. It is something added thereto and spread out over it like a flowering, an ornament, a garment. Obviously, freedom must be understood here in the wider sense that leaves untouched the philosophical problem of determinism. It may be objected that this freedom does not exist for the animal and the child; they *must* play because their instinct drives them to

it and because it serves to develop their bodily faculties and their powers of selection. The term "instinct", however, introduces an unknown quantity, and to presuppose the utility of play from the start is to be guilty of a *petitio principii*. Child and animal play because they enjoy playing, and therein precisely lies their freedom.

Be that as it may, for the adult and responsible human being play is a function which he could equally well leave alone. Play is superfluous. The need for it is only urgent to the extent that the enjoyment of it makes it a need. Play can be deferred or suspended at any time. It is never imposed by physical necessity or moral duty. It is never a task. It is done at leisure, during "free time". Only when play is a recognized cultural function—a rite, a ceremony—is it bound up with notions of obligation and duty.

Here, then, we have the first main characteristic of play: that it is free, is in fact freedom. A second characteristic is closely connected with this, namely, that play is 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. Every child knows perfectly well that he is "only pretending", or that it was "only for fun". How deep-seated this awareness is in the child's soul is strikingly illustrated by the following story, told to me by the father of the boy in question. He found his four-year-old son sitting at the front of a row of chairs, playing "trains". As he hugged him the boy said: "Don't kiss the engine, Daddy, or the carriages won't think it's real". 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. Nevertheless, as we have already pointed out, the consciousness of play being "only a pretend" does not by any means prevent it from proceeding with the utmost seriousness, with an absorption, a devotion that passes into rapture and, temporarily at least, completely abolishes that troublesome "only" feeling. Any game can at any time wholly run away with the players. The contrast between play and seriousness is always fluid. The inferiority of play is continually being offset by the corresponding superiority of its seriousness. Play turns to seriousness and seriousness to play. Play may rise to heights of beauty and sublimity that leave seriousness far beneath. Tricky questions such as these will come up for discussion when we start examining the relationship between play and ritual.

As regards its formal characteristics, all students lay stress on the *disinterestedness* of play. Not being "ordinary" life it stands outside the immediate satisfaction of wants and appetites, indeed it interrupts the appetitive process. It interpolates itself as a temporary activity satisfying in itself and ending there. Such at least is the way in which play presents itself to us in the first instance: as an intermezzo, an *interlude* in our daily lives. As a regularly recurring relaxation, however, it becomes the accompaniment, the complement, in fact an integral part of life in general. It adorns life, amplifies it and is to that extent a necessity both for the individual—as a life function—and for society by reason of the meaning it contains, its significance, its expressive value, its spiritual and social associations, in short, as a culture function. The expression of it satisfies all kinds of communal ideals. It thus has its place in a sphere superior to the strictly biological processes of nutrition, reproduction and self-preservation. This assertion is apparently contradicted by the fact that play, or rather sexual display, is predominant in animal life precisely at the mating-season. But would it be too absurd to assign a place *outside* the purely physiological, to the singing, cooing and strutting of birds just as we do to human play? In all its higher forms the latter at any rate always belongs to the sphere of festival and ritual—the sacred sphere.

Now, does the fact that play is a necessity, that it subserves culture, or indeed that it actually becomes culture, detract from its disinterested character? No, for the purposes it serves are external to immediate material interests or the individual satisfaction of biological needs. As a sacred activity play naturally contributes to the well-being of the group, but in quite another way and by other means than the acquisition of the necessities of life.

Play is distinct from "ordinary" life both as to locality and duration. This is the third main characteristic of play: its secludedness, its limitedness. It is "played out" within certain limits of time and place. It contains its own course and meaning.

Play begins, and then at a certain moment it is "over". It plays itself to an end. While it is in progress all is movement, change, alternation, succession, association, separation. But immediately connected with its limitation as to time there is a further curious feature of play: it at once assumes fixed form as a cultural phenomenon. Once played, it endures as a new-found creation of the

mind, a treasure to be retained by the memory. It is transmitted, it becomes tradition. It can be repeated at any time, whether it be "child's play" or a game of chess, or at fixed intervals like a mystery. In this faculty of repetition lies one of the most essential qualities of play. It holds good not only of play as a whole but also of its inner structure. In nearly all the higher forms of play the elements of repetition and alternation (as in the *refrain*), are like the warp and woof of a fabric.

More striking even than the limitation as to time is the limitation as to space. All play moves and has its being within a play-ground marked off beforehand either materially or ideally, deliberately or as a matter of course. Just as there is no formal difference between play and ritual, so the "consecrated spot" cannot be formally distinguished from the play-ground. The arena, the card-table, the magic circle, the temple, the stage, the screen, the tennis court, the court of justice, etc., are all in form and function play-grounds, i.e. forbidden spots, isolated, hedged round, hallowed, within which special rules obtain. All are temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart.

Inside the play-ground an absolute and peculiar order reigns. Here we come across another, very positive feature of play: it creates order, *is* order. Into an imperfect world and into the confusion of life it brings a temporary, a limited perfection. Play demands order absolute and supreme. The least deviation from it "spoils the game", robs it of its character and makes it worthless. The profound affinity between play and order is perhaps the reason why play, as we noted in passing, seems to lie to such a large extent in the field of aesthetics. Play has a tendency to be beautiful. It may be that this aesthetic factor is identical with the impulse to create orderly form, which animates play in all its aspects. The words we use to denote the elements of play belong for the most part to aesthetics, terms with which we try to describe the effects of beauty: tension, poise, balance, contrast, variation, solution, resolution, etc. Play casts a spell over us; it is "enchanting", "captivating". It is invested with the noblest qualities we are capable of perceiving in things: rhythm and harmony.

The element of tension in play to which we have just referred plays a particularly important part. Tension means uncertainty, chanciness; a striving to decide the issue and so end it. The player wants something to "go", to "come off"; he wants to "succeed"

by his own exertions. Baby reaching for a toy, pussy patting a bobbin, a little girl playing ball—all want to achieve something difficult, to succeed, to end a tension. Play is “tense”, as we say. It is this element of tension and solution that governs all solitary games of skill and application such as puzzles, jig-saws, mosaic-making, patience, target-shooting, and the more play bears the character of competition the more fervent it will be. In gambling and athletics it is at its height. Though play as such is outside the range of good and bad, the element of tension imparts to it a certain ethical value in so far as it means a testing of the player’s prowess: his courage, tenacity, resources and, last but not least, his spiritual powers—his “fairness”; because, despite his ardent desire to win, he must still stick to the rules of the game.

These rules in their turn are a very important factor in the play-concept. All play has its rules. They determine what “holds” in the temporary world circumscribed by play. The rules of a game are absolutely binding and allow no doubt. Paul Valéry once in passing gave expression to a very cogent thought when he said: “No scepticism is possible where the rules of a game are concerned, for the principle underlying them is an unshakable truth. . . .” Indeed, as soon as the rules are transgressed the whole play-world collapses. The game is over. The umpire’s whistle breaks the spell and sets “real” life going again.

The player who trespasses against the rules or ignores them is a “spoil-sport”. The spoil-sport is not the same as the false player, the cheat; for the latter pretends to be playing the game and, on the face of it, still acknowledges the magic circle. It is curious to note how much more lenient society is to the cheat than to the spoil-sport. This is because the spoil-sport shatters the play-world itself. By withdrawing from the game he reveals the relativity and fragility of the play-world in which he had temporarily shut himself with others. He robs play of its *illusion*—a pregnant word which means literally “in-play” (from *inlusio*, *illudere* or *inludere*). Therefore he must be cast out, for he threatens the existence of the play-community. The figure of the spoil-sport is most apparent in boys’ games. The little community does not enquire whether the spoil-sport is guilty of defection because he dares not enter into the game or because he is not allowed to. Rather, it does not recognize “not being allowed” and calls it “not daring”. For it, the problem of obedience and conscience is no more than fear of punishment. The spoil-sport breaks the magic world, therefore

he is a coward and must be ejected. In the world of high seriousness, too, the cheat and the hypocrite have always had an easier time of it than the spoil-sports, here called apostates, heretics, innovators, prophets, conscientious objectors, etc. It sometimes happens, however, that the spoil-sports in their turn make a new community with rules of its own. The outlaw, the revolutionary, the cabbalist or member of a secret society, indeed heretics of all kinds are of a highly associative if not sociable disposition, and a certain element of play is prominent in all their doings.

A play-community generally tends to become permanent even after the game is over. Of course, not every game of marbles or every bridge-party leads to the founding of a club. But the feeling of being "apart together" in an exceptional situation, of sharing something important, of mutually withdrawing from the rest of the world and rejecting the usual norms, retains its magic beyond the duration of the individual game. The club pertains to play as the hat to the head. It would be rash to explain all the associations which the anthropologist calls "phratria"—e.g. clans, brotherhoods, etc.—simply as play-communities; nevertheless it has been shown again and again how difficult it is to draw the line between, on the one hand, permanent social groupings—particularly in archaic cultures with their extremely important, solemn, indeed sacred customs—and the sphere of play on the other.

The exceptional and special position of play is most tellingly illustrated by the fact that it loves to surround itself with an air of secrecy. Even in early childhood the charm of play is enhanced by making a "secret" out of it. This is for *us*, not for the "others". What the "others" do "outside" is no concern of ours at the moment. Inside the circle of the game the laws and customs of ordinary life no longer count. We are different and do things differently. This temporary abolition of the ordinary world is fully acknowledged in child-life, but it is no less evident in the great ceremonial games of savage societies. During the great feast of initiation when the youths are accepted into the male community, it is not the neophytes only that are exempt from the ordinary laws and regulations: there is a truce to all feuds in the tribe. All retaliatory acts and vendettas are suspended. This temporary suspension of normal social life on account of the sacred play-season has numerous traces in the more advanced civilizations as well. Everything that pertains to saturnalia and carnival customs

belongs to it. Even with us a bygone age of robuster private habits than ours, more marked class-privileges and a more complaisant police recognized the orgies of young men of rank under the name of a "rag". The saturnalian licence of young men still survives, in fact, in the ragging at English universities, which the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines as "an extensive display of noisy and disorderly conduct carried out in defiance of authority and discipline".

The "differentness" and secrecy of play are most vividly expressed in "dressing up". Here the "extra-ordinary" nature of play reaches perfection. The disguised or masked individual "plays" another part, another being. He *is* another being. The terrors of childhood, open-hearted gaiety, mystic fantasy and sacred awe are all inextricably entangled in this strange business of masks and disguises.

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.

The function of play in the higher forms which concern us here can largely be derived from the two basic aspects under which we meet it: as a contest *for* something or a representation *of* something. These two functions can unite in such a way that the game "represents" a contest, or else becomes a contest for the best representation of something.

Representation means display, and this may simply consist in the exhibition of something naturally given, before an audience. The peacock and the turkey merely display their gorgeous plumage to the females, but the essential feature of it lies in the parading of something out of the ordinary and calculated to arouse admiration. If the bird accompanies this exhibition with dance-steps we have a performance, a *stepping out of* common reality into a higher order. We are ignorant of the bird's sensations while so engaged. We know, however, that in child-life performances of this kind are full of imagination. The child is

to him we are dealing with a necessary mental process of transformation. The thrill, the "being seized" by the phenomena of life and nature is condensed by reflex action, as it were, to poetic expression and art. It is difficult to describe the process of creative imagination in words that are more to the point, though they can hardly be called a true "explanation". The mental road from aesthetic or mystical, or at any rate meta-logical, perception of cosmic order to ritual play remains as dark as before.

While repeatedly using the term "play" for these performances the great anthropologist omits, however, to state what exactly he understands by it. He would even seem to have surreptitiously re-admitted the very thing he so strongly deprecates and which does not altogether fit in with the essential quality of play: the concept of purpose. For, in Frobenius' description of it, play quite explicitly *serves* to represent a cosmic event and thus bring it about. A quasi-rationalistic element irresistibly creeps in. For Frobenius, play and representation have their *raison d'être* after all, in the expression of something else, namely, the "being seized" by a cosmic event. But the very fact that the dramatization is *played* is, apparently, of secondary importance for him. Theoretically at least, the emotion could have been communicated in some other way. In our view, on the contrary, the whole point is the *playing*. Such ritual play is essentially no different from one of the higher forms of common child-play or indeed animal-play. Now in the case of these two latter forms one could hardly suppose their origin to lie in some cosmic emotion struggling for expression. Child-play possesses the play-form in its veriest essence, and most purely.

We might, perhaps, describe the process leading from "seizure" by nature to ritual performance, in terms that would avoid the above-mentioned inadequacy without, however, claiming to lay bare the inscrutable. Archaic society, we would say, plays as the child or animal plays. Such playing contains at the outset all the elements proper to play: order, tension, movement, change, solemnity, rhythm, rapture. Only in a later phase of society is play associated with the idea of something to be expressed in and by it, namely, what we would call "life" or "nature". Then, what was wordless play assumes poetic form. In the form and function of play, itself an independent entity which is senseless and irrational, man's consciousness that he is embedded in a sacred order of things finds its first, highest, and holiest expression.

Gradually the significance of a sacred act permeates the playing. Ritual grafts itself upon it; but the primary thing is and remains play.

We are hovering over spheres of thought barely accessible either to psychology or to philosophy. Such questions as these plumb the depths of our consciousness. Ritual is seriousness at its highest and holiest. Can it nevertheless be play? We began by saying that all play, both of children and of grown-ups, can be performed in the most perfect seriousness. Does this go so far as to imply that play is still bound up with the sacred emotion of the sacramental act? Our conclusions are to some extent impeded by the rigidity of our accepted ideas. We are accustomed to think of play and seriousness as an absolute antithesis. It would seem, however, that this does not go to the heart of the matter.

Let us consider for a moment the following argument. The child plays in complete—we can well say, in sacred—earnest. But it plays and knows that it plays. The sportsman, too, plays with all the fervour of a man enraptured, but he still knows that he is playing. The actor on the stage is wholly absorbed in his playing, but is all the time conscious of “the play”. The same holds good of the violinist, though he may soar to realms beyond this world. The play-character, therefore, may attach to the sublimest forms of action. Can we now extend the line to ritual and say that the priest performing the rites of sacrifice is only playing? At first sight it seems preposterous, for if you grant it for one religion you must grant it for all. Hence our ideas of ritual, magic, liturgy, sacrament and mystery would all fall within the play-concept. In dealing with abstractions we must always guard against overstraining their significance. We would merely be playing with words were we to stretch the play-concept unduly. But, all things considered, I do not think we are falling into that error when we characterize ritual as play. The ritual act has all the formal and essential characteristics of play which we enumerated above, particularly in so far as it transports the participants to another world. This identity of ritual and play was unreservedly recognized by Plato as a given fact. He had no hesitation in comprising the *sacra* in the category of play. “I say that a man must be serious with the serious,” he says (*Laws*, vii, 803). “God alone is worthy of supreme seriousness, but man is made God’s plaything, and that is the best part of him. Therefore every man and woman

should live life accordingly, and play the noblest games and be of another mind from what they are at present. . . . For they deem war a serious thing, though in war there is neither play nor culture worthy the name (οὐτ' οὖν παιδιὰ . . . οὐτ' αἰ παιδεία), which are the things we deem most serious. Hence all must live in peace as well as they possibly can. What, then, is the right way of living? Life must be lived as play, playing certain games, making sacrifices, singing and dancing, and then a man will be able to propitiate the gods, and defend himself against his enemies, and win in the contest."¹

The close connections between mystery and play have been touched on most tellingly by Romano Guardini in his book *The Spirit of the Liturgy* (Ecclesia Orans 1, Freiburg, 1922), particularly the chapter entitled "Die Liturgie als Spiel". He does not actually cite Plato, but comes as near the above quotation as may be. He ascribes to liturgy more than one of the features we held to be characteristic of play, amongst others the fact that, in its highest examples, liturgy is "zwecklos aber doch sinnvoll"—"pointless but significant".

The Platonic identification of play and holiness does not defile the latter by calling it play, rather it exalts the concept of play to the highest regions of the spirit. We said at the beginning that play was anterior to culture; in a certain sense it is also superior to it or at least detached from it. In play we may move below the level of the serious, as the child does; but we can also move above it—in the realm of the beautiful and the sacred.

From this point of view we can now define the relationship between ritual and play more closely. We are no longer astonished at the substantial similarity of the two forms, and the question as to how far every ritual act falls within the category of play continues to hold our attention.

We found that one of the most important characteristics of play was its spatial separation from ordinary life. A closed space is marked out for it, either materially or ideally, hedged off from the everyday surroundings. Inside this space the play proceeds, inside it the rules obtain. Now, the marking out of some sacred spot is also the primary characteristic of every sacred act. This requirement of isolation for ritual, including magic and law, is much

¹Cf. *Laws*, vii, 796, where Plato speaks of the sacred dances of the Kouretes of Crete, calling them ἐνόπλια παίγνια.

more than merely spatial and temporal. Nearly all rites of consecration and initiation entail a certain artificial seclusion for the performers and those to be initiated. Whenever it is a question of taking a vow or being received into an Order or confraternity, or of oaths and secret societies, in one way or another there is always such a delimitation of room for play. The magician, the augur, the sacrificer begins his work by circumscribing his sacred space. Sacrament and mystery presuppose a hallowed spot.

Formally speaking, there is no distinction whatever between marking out a space for a sacred purpose and marking it out for purposes of sheer play. The turf, the tennis-court, the chess-board and pavement-hopscotch cannot formally be distinguished from the temple or the magic circle. The striking similarity between sacrificial rites all over the earth shows that such customs must be rooted in a very fundamental, an aboriginal layer of the human mind. As a rule people reduce this over-all congruity of cultural forms to some "reasonable", "logical" cause by explaining the need for isolation and seclusion as an anxiety to protect the consecrated individual from noxious influences—because, in his consecrated state, he is particularly exposed to the malign workings of ghosts, besides being himself a danger to his surroundings. Such an explanation puts intellection and utilitarian purpose at the beginning of the cultural process: the very thing Frobenius warned against. Even if we do not fall back here on the antiquated notion of a priestcraft inventing religion, we are still introducing a rationalistic element better avoided. If, on the other hand, we accept the essential and original identity of play and ritual we simply recognize the hallowed spot as a play-ground, and the misleading question of the "why and the wherefore" does not arise at all.

If ritual proves to be formally indistinguishable from play the question remains whether this resemblance goes further than the purely formal. It is surprising that anthropology and comparative religion have paid so little attention to the problem of how far such sacred activities as proceed within the forms of play also proceed in the attitude and mood of play. Even Frobenius has not, to my knowledge, asked this question.

Needless to say, the mental attitude in which a community performs and experiences its sacred rites is one of high and holy earnest. But let it be emphasized again that genuine and spontaneous play can also be profoundly serious. The player can

abandon himself body and soul to the game, and the consciousness of its being "merely" a game can be thrust into the background. The joy inextricably bound up with playing can turn not only into tension, but into elation. Frivolity and ecstasy are the twin poles between which play moves.

The play-mood is *labile* in its very nature. At any moment "ordinary life" may reassert its rights either by an impact from without, which interrupts the game, or by an offence against the rules, or else from within, by a collapse of the play spirit, a sobering, a disenchantment.

What, then, is the attitude and mood prevailing at holy festivals? The sacred act is "celebrated" on a "holiday"—i.e. it forms part of a general feast on the occasion of a holy day. When the people foregather at the sanctuary they gather together for collective rejoicing. Consecrations, sacrifices, sacred dances and contests, performances, mysteries—all are comprehended within the act of celebrating a festival. The rites may be bloody, the probations of the young men awaiting initiation may be cruel, the masks may be terrifying, but the whole thing has a festal nature. Ordinary life is at a standstill. Banquets, junketings and all kinds of wanton revels are going on all the time the feast lasts. Whether we think of the Ancient Greek festivities or of the African religions to-day we can hardly draw any sharp line between the festival mood in general and the holy frenzy surrounding the central mystery.

Almost simultaneously with the appearance of the Dutch edition of this book the Hungarian scholar Karl Kerényi published a treatise on the nature of the festival which has the closest ties with our theme.¹ According to Kerényi, the festival too has that character of primacy and absolute independence which we predicated of play. "Among the psychic realities," he says, "the feast is a thing in itself, not to be confused with anything else in the world." Just as we thought the play-concept somewhat negligently treated by the anthropologist, so in his view is the feast. "The phenomenon of the feast appears to have been completely passed over by the ethnologist." "For all science is concerned it might not exist at all." Neither might play, we would like to add.

In the very nature of things the relationship between feast and

¹*Vom Wesen des Festes*, Paideuma, Mitteilungen zur Kulturkunde 1, Heft 2 (Dez., 1938), pp. 59-74.

still warn against drawing the inference that the whole system of beliefs and practices is only a fraud invented by a group of "unbelievers" with a view to dominating the credulous. It is true that such an interpretation is given not only by many travellers but sometimes even by the traditions of the natives themselves. Yet it cannot be the right one. "The origin of any sacred act can only lie in the credulity of all, and the spurious maintaining of it in the interests of a special group can only be the final phase of a long line of development." As I see it, psychoanalysis tends to fall back on this antiquated interpretation of circumcision and puberty practices, so rightly rejected by Jensen.¹

From the foregoing it is quite clear, to my mind at least, that where savage ritual is concerned we never lose sight of the play-concept for a single moment. To describe the phenomena we have to use the term "play" over and over again. What is more, the unity and indivisibility of belief and unbelief, the indissoluble connection between sacred earnest and "make-believe" or "fun", are best understood in the concept of play itself. Jensen, though admitting the similarity of the child's world to that of the savage, still tries to distinguish in principle between the mentality of the two. The child, he says, when confronted with the figure of Santa Claus, has to do with a "ready-made concept", in which he "finds his way" with a lucidity and endowment of his own. But "the creative attitude of the savage with regard to the ceremonies here in question is quite another thing. He has to do not with ready-made concepts but with his natural surroundings, which themselves demand interpretation; he grasps their mysterious daemonism and tries to give it in representative form".² Here we recognize the views of Frobenius, who was Jensen's teacher. Still, two objections occur. Firstly, when calling the process in the savage mind "quite another thing" from that in the child-mind, he is speaking of the *originators* of the ritual on the one hand and of the child of *to-day* on the other. But we know nothing of these originators. All we can study is a ritualistic community which receives its religious imagery as traditional material just as "ready-made" as the child does, and responds to it similarly. Secondly, even if we ignore this, the process of "interpreting" the natural surroundings, of "grasping" them and "representing" them in a ritual image remains altogether inaccessible to our observation. It is only by fanciful metaphors that Frobenius and Jensen force

¹Jensen, *op. cit.* p. 152.

²*Op. cit.* p. 149 f.

an approach to it. The most we can say of the function that is operative in the process of image-making or imagination is that it is a poetic function; and we define it best of all by calling it a function of play—the *ludic* function, in fact.

So that the apparently quite simple question of what play really is, leads us deep into the problem of the nature and origin of religious concepts. As we all know, one of the most important basic ideas with which every student of comparative religion has to acquaint himself is the following. When a certain form of religion accepts a sacred identity between two things of a different order, say a human being and an animal, this relationship is not adequately expressed by calling it a "symbolical correspondence" as we conceive this. The identity, the essential oneness of the two goes far deeper than the correspondence between a substance and its symbolic image. It is a mystic unity. The one has *become* the other. In his magic dance the savage *is* a kangaroo. We must always be on our guard against the deficiencies and differences of our means of expression. In order to form any idea at all of the mental habits of the savage we are forced to give them in our terminology. Whether we will or not we are always transposing the savage's ideas of religion into the strictly logical modes of our own thought. We express the relationship between him and the animal he "identifies" himself with, as a "being" for him but a "playing" for us. He has taken on the "essence" of the kangaroo, says the savage; he is playing the kangaroo, say we. The savage, however, knows nothing of the conceptual distinctions between "being" and "playing"; he knows nothing of "identity", "image" or "symbol". Hence it remains an open question whether we do not come nearest to the mental attitude of the savage performing a ritual act, by adhering to this primary, universally understandable term "play". In play as we conceive it the distinction between belief and make-believe breaks down. The concept of play merges quite naturally with that of holiness. Any Prelude of Bach, any line of tragedy proves it. By considering the whole sphere of so-called primitive culture as a play-sphere we pave the way to a more direct and more general understanding of its peculiarities than any meticulous psychological or sociological analysis would allow.

Primitive, or let us say, archaic ritual is thus sacred play, indispensable for the well-being of the community, fecund of cosmic insight and social development but always play in the sense Plato

gave to it—an action accomplishing itself outside and above the necessities and seriousness of everyday life. In this sphere of sacred play the child and the poet are at home with the savage. His aesthetic sensibility has brought the modern man closer to this sphere than the “enlightened” man of the 18th century ever was. Think of the peculiar charm that the mask as an *objet d’art* has for the modern mind. People nowadays try to feel the essence of savage life. This kind of exoticism may sometimes be a little affected, but it goes a good deal deeper than the 18th century *engouement* for Turks, “Chinamen” and Indians. Modern man is very sensitive to the far-off and the strange. Nothing helps him so much in his understanding of savage society as his feeling for masks and disguise. While ethnology has demonstrated their enormous social importance, they arouse in the educated layman and art-lover an immediate aesthetic emotion compounded of beauty, fright, and mystery. Even for the cultured adult of to-day the mask still retains something of its terrifying power, although no religious emotions are attached to it. The sight of the masked figure, as a purely aesthetic experience, carries us beyond “ordinary life” into a world where something other than daylight reigns; it carries us back to the world of the savage, the child and the poet, which is the world of play.

Even if we can legitimately reduce our ideas on the significance of primitive ritual to an irreducible play-concept, one extremely troublesome question still remains. What if we now ascend from the lower religions to the higher? From the rude and outlandish ritual of the African, American or Australian aborigines our vision shifts to Vedic sacrificial lore, already, in the hymns of the *Rig-Veda*, pregnant with the wisdom of the Upanishads, or to the profoundly mystical identifications of god, man, and beast in Egyptian religion, or to the Orphic and Eleusinian mysteries. In form and practice all these are closely allied to the so-called primitive religions even to bizarre and bloody particulars. But the high degree of wisdom and truth we discern, or think we can discern in them, forbids us to speak of them with that air of superiority which, as a matter of fact, is equally out of place in “primitive” cultures. We must ask whether this formal similarity entitles us to extend the qualification “play” to the consciousness of the holy, the faith embodied in these higher creeds. If we accept the Platonic definition of play there is nothing preposterous or

II

THE PLAY-CONCEPT AS EXPRESSED IN LANGUAGE

WHEN speaking of play as something known to all, and when trying to analyse or define the idea expressed in that word, we must always bear in mind that the idea as we know it is defined and perhaps limited by the word we use for it. Word and idea are not born of scientific or logical thinking but of creative language, which means of innumerable languages—for this act of “conception” has taken place over and over again. Nobody will expect that every language, in forming its idea of and expression for play, could have hit on the same idea or found a single word for it, in the way that every language has one definite word for “hand” or “foot”. The matter is not as simple as that.

We can only start from the play-concept that is common to us, i.e. the one covered, with slight variations, by the words corresponding to the English word “play” in most modern European languages. Such a concept, we felt, seemed to be tolerably well defined in the following terms: 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”. Thus defined, the concept seemed capable of embracing everything we call “play” in animals, children and grown-ups: games of strength and skill, inventing games, guessing games, games of chance, exhibitions and performances of all kinds. We ventured to call the category “play” one of the most fundamental in life.

Now it appears at once that a general play-category has not been distinguished with equal definiteness by all languages everywhere, nor expressed in one word. All peoples play, and play remarkably alike; but their languages differ widely in their conception of play, conceiving it neither as distinctly nor as broadly as modern European languages do. From a nominalist point of view we might deny the validity of a general concept and say that for every human group the concept “play” contains just what is

expressed in the word—or rather words. For it is arguable that one language has succeeded better than others in getting the various aspects of play into one word. And such indeed appears to be the case. One culture has abstracted a general notion of play much earlier and more completely than another, with the curious result that there are highly developed languages which have retained totally different words for the various play-forms and that this multiplicity of terms has itself impeded the aggregation of all the forms under one head. One is reminded here of the well-known fact that some of the so-called primitive languages have words for the different species of a common genus, as for eel and pike, but none for fish.

Various indications convince us that the abstraction of a general play-concept has been as tardy and secondary in some cultures as the play-function itself is fundamental and primary. In this respect it seems to me highly significant that in none of the mythologies known to me has play been embodied in a divine or daemonic figure,¹ while on the other hand the gods are often represented as playing. The absence of a common Indo-European word for play also points to the late conception of a general play-concept. Even the Germanic group of languages differs widely in the naming of play and divides it into three compartments.

It is probably no accident that the very peoples who have a pronounced and multifarious play-“instinct” have several distinct expressions for the play-activity. I think this is more or less true of Greek, Sanskrit, Chinese and English. Greek possesses a curious and specific expression for children’s games in the ending *-inda*. In themselves the syllables do not signify anything; they merely give to any word the connotation of “playing at something”. *-inda* is an indeclinable and, linguistically speaking, underivable suffix.² Greek children played *sphairinda*—at ball; *halkustinda*—tug o’ war; *streptinda*—a throwing game; *basilinda*—king of the castle. The complete grammatical independence of the suffix is a symbol, as it were, of the underivable nature of the play-concept. In contrast to this unique and specific designation of child-play Greek has no less than three different words for play in

¹Needless to say, Lusus, son or companion of Bacchus and progenitor of the Lusitanians, is a bookish invention of very late date.

²At best we may conjecture some affinity with *-νδος* and hence infer a pre-Indo-germanic or Aegæan origin. The ending occurs as a verbal suffix in *ἀλινδω*, *κυλινδω*, both in the sense of “revolving”, variants of *ἀλω* and *κυλω*. The idea of “playing” has only a faint echo here.

general. First of all: *παιδιά*, the most familiar of the three. Its etymology is obvious; it means "of or pertaining to the child", but is immediately distinguished by its accent from *παιδία*—childishness. The use of *παιδιά*, however, is not by any means restricted to children's games. With its derivatives *παίζειν*, to play, *παῖγμα*, *παίγνιον*, a toy, it serves to denote all kinds of play, even the highest and most sacred, as we have seen from the passage in Plato's *Laws*. A note of light-heartedness and carefree joyfulness seems to be struck in the whole word-group. Compared with *παιδιά* the other word for play—*ἄδύρω*, *ἄδυρμα*—stays very much in the background. It is tinged with the idea of the trifling, the nugatory.

There remains, however, an extensive and very important domain which in our terminology would come under the head of playing but which is not covered in Greek either by *παιδιά* or *ἄδυρμα*: to wit, matches and contests. The whole of this sphere, so extremely important in Greek life, is expressed by the word *ἄγών*. We can well say that an essential part of the play-concept is concealed in the field of operation of the *ἄγών*. At the same time we must ask whether the Greeks were not right to make a verbal distinction between contest and play. It is true that the element of "non-seriousness", the ludic factor proper, is not as a rule explicitly expressed in the word *ἄγών*. Moreover, contests of every description played such an enormous part in Greek culture and in the daily life of every Greek that it might seem overbold to class so great a section of Greek civilization with "play". This indeed is the point of view taken by Professor Bolkestein in his criticism of my opinions to the contrary.¹ He reproaches me with having "illegitimately included the Greek contests, which range from those rooted in ritual to the most trifling, in the play-category". He goes on: "When speaking of the Olympic *games* we inadvertently make use of a Latin term which expresses a Roman valuation of the contests so designated, totally different from the valuation of the Greeks themselves". After enumerating a long series of *agonistic* activities showing how the competitive impulse dominated the whole of Greek life, my critic concludes: "All this has nothing to do with *play*—unless one would assert that the whole of life was play for the Greeks!"

In a certain sense such indeed will be the contention of this

¹*Proceedings of the 17th Congress of Dutch Philologists*, Leyden, 1937, where he refers to my rectoral address on "The Borderline between Play and Seriousness in Culture".

book. Despite my admiration for Professor Bolkestein's lasting and lucid interpretation of Greek culture, and despite the fact that Greek is not alone in linguistically distinguishing between contest and play, I am fervently convinced of their underlying identity. Since we shall have to return again and again to this conceptual distinction I shall confine myself here to one argument only. The *agon* in Greek life, or the contest anywhere else in the world, bears all the formal characteristics of play, and as to its function belongs almost wholly to the sphere of the festival, which is the play-sphere. It is quite impossible to separate the contest as a cultural function from the complex "play-festival-rite". As to why the Greek language makes this remarkable terminological distinction between play and contest, this might, in my opinion, be explained as follows. The conception of a general, all-embracing and logically homogeneous play-concept is, as we have seen, a rather late invention of language. From very early on, however, sacred and profane contests had taken such an enormous place in Greek social life and gained so momentous a value that people were no longer aware of their play-character. The contest, in all things and on every occasion, had become so intense a cultural function that the Greeks felt it as quite "ordinary", something existing in its own right. For this reason the Greeks, possessing as they did two distinct words for play and contest, failed to perceive the essential play-element in the latter very clearly, with the result that the conceptual, and hence the linguistic, union never took place.¹

As we shall see, Greek terminology does not stand alone in the matter of play. Sanskrit too has at least four verbal roots for the play-concept. The most general word for playing is *kridati*, denoting the play of animals, children and grown-ups. Like the word "play" in the Germanic languages it also serves for the movement of wind or waves. It can mean hopping, skipping, or dancing in general without being expressly related to playing in particular. In these latter connotations it approximates to the root *nrt*, which covers the whole field of the dance and dramatic performances. Next there is *divyati*, meaning primarily gambling, dicing, but also playing in the sense of joking, jesting, trifling, making mock of. The original meaning appears to be throwing,

¹This argument does not occur in the German edition of Huizinga's book, and the presentation of it in his own English version is somewhat obscure. It is hoped that the drift of his argument has been re-constructed without undue distortion. Trans.

casting; but there is a further connection with shining and radiance.¹ Then, the root *las* (whence *vilāsa*) combines the meanings of shining, sudden appearance, sudden noise, blazing up, moving to and fro, playing and “pursuing” an occupation (as in the German “etwas treiben”). Lastly, the noun *lilā*, with its denominative verb *līlayati* (the primary sense of which is probably rocking, swinging), expresses all the light, aerial, frivolous, effortless and insignificant sides of playing. Over and above this, however, *lilā* is used in the sense of “as if”, to denote “seeming”, “imitation”, the “appearance” of things, as in the English “like”, “likeness” or German “gleich”, “Gleichnis”. Thus *gajalīlayā* (literally: “with elephant play”) means “like an elephant”; *gājendralīla* (literally: “elephant-play-man”) means a man representing an elephant or playing the elephant. In all these denominations of play the semantic starting-point seems to be the idea of rapid movement—a connection found in many other languages. This is not to say, of course, that in the beginning the words denoted rapid movement exclusively and were only later applied to play. To my knowledge, the contest as such is not expressed by any of the play-words in Sanskrit; oddly enough there is no specific word for it, although contests of the most various kinds were common in Ancient India.

Professor Duyvendak’s friendly help allows me to say something about the Chinese expressions for the play-function. Here too there can be no grouping of all the activities we are wont to regard as play, under one head. Most important is the word *wan*, in which ideas of children’s games predominate, but extending its semantic range to the following special meanings: to be busy, to enjoy something, to trifle, to romp, to jest, to crack jokes, to make mock of. It also means to finger, to feel, to examine, to sniff at, to twiddle little ornaments, and finally to enjoy the moonlight. Hence the semantic starting-point would seem to be “handling something with playful attention”, or “to be lightly engrossed”. The word is not used for games of skill, contests, gambling or theatrical performances. For this, for orderly dramatic play, Chinese has words which belong to the conceptual field of “position”, “situation”, “arrangement”. Anything to do with contests is expressed by the special word *cheng*, the perfect equivalent of the Greek *agon*; apart from which *sai* denotes an organized contest for a prize.

¹We must leave to one side a possible connection with *dyu*—the clear sky.

such a conclusion, but so does the linguistic counter-evidence. Over against the languages we have just named we can set a whole series of others, equally discrete, which may be shown to present a wider conception of play. Apart from most of the modern European languages this holds good of Latin, Japanese and at least one of the Semitic tongues.

As to Japanese, Professor Rahder's kind help has enabled me to offer a few remarks. In contrast to Chinese and very like the modern languages of the West, it has a single, very definite word for the play-function and, in conjunction with this, an antonym denoting seriousness. The substantive *asobi* and the verb *asobu* mean: play in general, recreation, relaxation, amusement, passing the time or pastime, a trip or jaunt, dissipation, gambling, idling, lying idle, being unemployed. They also serve for: playing at something (e.g. the fool), representing something, imitation. Noteworthy too is "play" used in the sense of the limited mobility of a wheel, tool or any other structure, just as in Dutch, German and English.¹ *Asobu*, again, means to study under a teacher or at a university, which is reminiscent of the Latin word *ludus* in the sense of school. It can also mean jugglery, i.e. a sham-fight, but not the contest as such: here again there is another if slightly different demarcation between contest and play. Lastly, *asobu* is the word used for those Japanese aesthetic tea-parties where ceramics are passed admiringly from hand to hand amid utterances of approbation. Associations with rapid movement, shining and jesting seem to be lacking here.

A closer investigation of the Japanese conception of play would lead us more deeply into the study of Japanese culture than space allows. The following must suffice. The extraordinary earnestness and profound gravity of the Japanese ideal of life is masked by the fashionable fiction that everything is only play. Like the *chevalerie* of the Christian Middle Ages, Japanese *bushido* took shape almost entirely in the play-sphere and was enacted in play-forms. The language still preserves this conception in the *asobase-kotoba* (literally play-language) or polite speech, the mode of address used in conversation with persons of higher rank. The convention is that the higher classes are merely playing at all they do. The polite form for "you arrive in Tokio" is, literally, "you play arrival in Tokio"; and for "I hear that your father is dead", "I

¹I could not discover whether there was any influence here of the English technical term.

hear that your father has played dying". In other words, the revered person is imagined as living in an elevated sphere where only pleasure or condescension moves to action.

As against this masking of the aristocratic life behind play, Japanese has a very outspoken idea of seriousness or non-play. The word *majime* is variously rendered by seriousness, sobriety, gravity, honesty, solemnity, stateliness; also quietness, decency, "good form". It is related to the word which we render by "face" in the well-known Chinese expression "to lose face". As an question remains how far such a consciousness is compatible with the ritual act performed in devotion.

In Semitic languages the semantic field of play, as my late friend Professor Wensinck informed me, is dominated by the root *la'ab*, obviously cognate with *la'at*. Here, however, apart from meaning play in its proper sense, the word also means laughing and mocking. The Arabic *la'iba* covers playing in general, making mock of, and teasing. In Aramaic *la'ab* means laughing and mocking. Besides this, in Arabic and Syriac the same root serves for the dribbling and drooling of a baby (to be understood, perhaps, from its habit of blowing bubbles with spit, which can confidently be taken as a form of play). The Hebrew *sahaq* also associates laughing and playing. Lastly, it is worth noting that *la'iba* in Arabic is used for the "playing" of a musical instrument, as in some modern European languages. In Semitic languages, therefore, the play-concept would seem to be of a somewhat vaguer and looser character than in the ones we have examined so far. As we shall see, Hebrew affords striking evidence of the identity between the agonistic and the play principle.

In remarkable contrast to Greek with its changing and heterogeneous terms for the play-function, Latin has really only one word to cover the whole field of play: *ludus*, from *ludere*, of which *lusus* is a direct derivative. We should observe that *jocus*, *jocari* in the special sense of joking and jesting does not mean play proper in classical Latin. Though *ludere* may be used for the leaping of fishes, the fluttering of birds and the plashing of water, its etymology does not appear to lie in the sphere of rapid movement, flashing, etc., but in that of non-seriousness, and particularly of "semblance" or "deception". *Ludus* covers children's games, recreation, contests, liturgical and theatrical representations, and games of chance. In the expression *lares ludentes* it means "dancing". The idea of "feigning" or "taking on the semblance of"

Later English still preserves much of this wider significance, e.g. in Shakespeare's Richard the Third, Act IV:

"Ah, Buckingham, now do I play the touch,
To try if thou be current gold indeed".

Now, the formal correspondence between the Old English *plegan* and the (continental) Old Saxon *plegan*, the Old High German *pflegan* and the Old Frisian *plega* is complete and beyond doubt. All these words, from which the modern German *pflegen* and the Dutch *plegen* are directly derived, have, however, an abstract sense which is not that of play. The oldest meaning is "to vouch or stand guarantee for, to take a risk, to expose oneself to danger for someone or something".¹ Next comes "to bind or engage oneself (*sich verpflichten*), to attend to, take care of (*verpflegen*)". The German *pflegen* is also used in connection with the performance of a sacred act, the giving of advice, the administration of justice (*Rechtspflege*), and in other Germanic languages you can "pflegen" homage, thanks, oaths, mourning, work, love, sorcery and—lastly but rarely—even "play".² Hence the word is mainly at home in the sphere of religion, law, and ethics. Hitherto, on account of the manifest difference of meaning, it has generally been accepted that "to play" and *pflegen* (or its other Germanic equivalents) are etymologically homonymous: deriving from roots alike in sound but different in origin. Our preceding observations allow us to hold a contrary opinion. The difference lies rather in the fact that "play" moves and develops along the line of the concrete while *pflegen* does so along the line of the abstract; both, however, being semantically akin to the play-sphere. We might call it the sphere of ceremonial. Among the oldest significations of *pflegen* occurs the "celebrating of festivals" and "the exhibition of wealth"—whence the Dutch *plechtig*: "ceremonious", "solemn". In form, the German *Pflicht* and the Dutch *Plicht* correspond to the Anglo-Saxon *pliht* (whence the

¹Cf. J. Franck, *Etymologisch Woordenboek der Nederlandsche taal*, edited by N. van Wijk (Haag, 1912); *Woordenboek der Nederlandsche taal*, xii, 1, edited by G. J. Boekenoogen and J. H. van Lessen (Haag-Leiden, 1931).

²In one of the songs of Hadewych, nun of Brabant (13th century) there is the following verse:

Der minnen ghebruken, dat es een spel,
Dat niemand wel ghetoenen en mach,
Ende al mocht dies pleget iet toenen wel,
Hine const verstaen, dies noijt en plach.

Liedeven van Hadewijch, ed. Johanna Snellen (Amsterdam, 1907).
Plegen can here be understood unhesitatingly as play.

III

PLAY AND CONTEST AS CIVILIZING FUNCTIONS

WHEN speaking of the play-element in culture we do not mean that among the various activities of civilized life an important place is reserved for play, nor do we mean that civilization has arisen out of play by some evolutionary process, in the sense that something which was originally play passed into something which was no longer play and could henceforth be called culture. The view we take in the following pages is that culture arises in the form of play, that it is played from the very beginning. Even those activities which aim at the immediate satisfaction of vital needs—hunting, for instance—tend, in archaic society, to take on the play-form. Social life is endued with supra-biological forms, in the shape of play, which enhance its value. It is through this playing that society expresses its interpretation of life and the world. By this we do not mean that play turns into culture, rather that in its earliest phases culture has the play-character, that it proceeds in the shape and the mood of play. In the twin union of play and culture, play is primary. It is an objectively recognizable, a concretely definable thing, whereas culture is only the term which our historical judgement attaches to a particular instance. Such a conception approximates to that of Frobenius who, in his *Kulturgeschichte Afrikas*, speaks of the genesis of culture “als eines aus dem natürlichen ‘Sein’ aufgestiegenen ‘Spieles’ ” (as a “play” emerging out of natural “being”). In my opinion, however, Frobenius conceives the relationship between play and culture too mystically and describes it altogether too vaguely. He fails to put his finger on the point where culture emerges from play.

As a culture proceeds, either progressing or regressing, the original relationship we have postulated between play and non-play does not remain static. As a rule the play-element gradually recedes into the background, being absorbed for the most part in the sacred sphere. The remainder crystallizes as knowledge: folklore, poetry, philosophy, or in the various forms of judicial and social life. The original play-element is then almost completely

between two groups was still called "playing", the word used being taken from the sphere of laughter. On numerous Greek vases we can see that a contest of armed men is characterized as an agon by the presence of the flute-players who accompany it. At the Olympic games there were duels fought to the death.¹ The mighty *tours de force* accomplished by Thor and his companions in their contest with the Man of Utgardaloki are called *leika*, "play". For all these reasons it would not seem overbold to consider the terminological disparity between contest and play in Greek as the more or less accidental failure to abstract a general concept that would have embraced both. In short, the question as to whether we are entitled to include the contest in the play-category can be answered unhesitatingly in the affirmative.

Like all other forms of play, the contest is largely devoid of purpose. That is to say, the action begins and ends in itself, and the outcome does not contribute to the necessary life-processes of the group. The popular Dutch saying to the effect that "it is not the marbles that matter, but the game", expresses this clearly enough. Objectively speaking, the result of the game is unimportant and a matter of indifference. On a visit to England the Shah of Persia is supposed to have declined the pleasure of attending a race meeting, saying that he knew very well that one horse runs faster than another. From his point of view he was perfectly right: he refused to take part in a play-sphere that was alien to him, preferring to remain outside. The outcome of a game or a contest—except, of course, one played for pecuniary profit—is only interesting to those who enter into it as players or spectators, either personally and locally, or else as listeners by radio or viewers by television, etc., and accept its rules. They have become play-fellows and choose to be so. For them it is immaterial whether Oxford wins, or Cambridge.

"There is something at stake"—the essence of play is contained in that phrase. But this "something" is not the material result of the play, not the mere fact that the ball is in the hole, but the ideal fact that the game is a success or has been successfully concluded. Success gives the player a satisfaction that lasts a shorter or a longer while as the case may be. The pleasurable feeling of satisfaction mounts with the presence of spectators, though these are not essential to it. A person who gets a game of patience

¹Plutarch deemed this form of contest contrary to the idea of the agon, in which Miss Harrison (*Themis*, pp. 221, 323) agrees with him, wrongly, as it seems to me.

the tournaments of songs and games between the young men and girls of a group at the spring or autumn festivals. Granet, when dealing with this theme for ancient China in the light of the love-songs in the *Shih Ching*, mentioned similar festivals in Tonking, Tibet and Japan. An Annamite scholar, Nguyen van Huyen, has taken up the theme for Annam, where these customs were in full flower until quite recently, and given an excellent description of them in a thesis written in French.¹ Here we find ourselves in the midst of the play-sphere: antiphonal songs, ball-games, courtship, question games, riddle-solving, *jeux d'esprit*, all in the form of a lively contest between the sexes. The songs themselves are typical play-products with fixed rules, varied repetition of words or phrases, questions and answers. Anyone who wishes to have a striking illustration of the connection between play and culture could not do better than read Nguyen's book with its wealth of examples.

All these forms of contest betray their connection with ritual over and over again by the constant belief that they are indispensable for the smooth running of the seasons, the ripening of crops, the prosperity of the whole year.

If the outcome of a contest as such, as a performance, is deemed to influence the course of nature, it follows that the particular kind of contest through which this result is obtained is a matter of small moment. It is the winning itself that counts. Every victory *represents*, that is, realizes for the victor the triumph of the good powers over the bad, and at the same time the salvation of the group that effects it. The victory not only represents that salvation but, by so doing, makes it effective. Hence it comes about that the beneficent result may equally well flow from games of pure chance as from games in which strength, skill or wit decide the issue. Luck may have a sacred significance; the fall of the dice may signify and determine the divine workings; by it we may move the gods as efficiently as by any other form of contest. Indeed, we may go one further and say that for the human mind the ideas of happiness, luck and fate seem to lie very close to the realm of the sacred. In order to realize these mental associations we moderns have only to think of the sort of futile auguries we all used to practise in childhood without really believing in them, and which a perfectly balanced adult not in the least given to superstition may sometimes catch himself doing. As a rule we do not

¹*Les chants alternés des garçons et des filles en Annam*, Paris, 1933.

But when Held concludes from the sacred significance of dicing that games in archaic culture are not entitled to be called "play",¹ I am inclined to deny this most strenuously. On the contrary, it is precisely the play-character of dicing that gives it so important a place in ritual.

The agonistic basis of cultural life in archaic society has only been brought to light since ethnology was enriched by an accurate description of the curious custom practised by certain Indian tribes in British Columbia, now generally known as the *potlatch*.² In its most typical form as found among the Kwakiutl tribe the potlatch is a great solemn feast, during which one of two groups, with much pomp and ceremony, makes gifts on a large scale to the other group for the express purpose of showing its superiority. The only return expected by the donors but incumbent on the recipients lies in the obligation of the latter to reciprocate the feast within a certain period and if possible to surpass it. This curious donative festival dominates the entire communal life of the tribes that know it: their ritual, their law, their art. Any important event will be the occasion for a potlatch—a birth, a death, a marriage, an initiation ceremony, a tattooing, the erection of a tomb, etc. A chieftain will give a potlatch when he builds a house or sets up a totem-pole. At the potlatch the families or clans are at their best, singing their sacred songs and exhibiting their masks, while the medicine-men demonstrate their possession by the clan-spirits. But the main thing is the distribution of goods. The feast-giver squanders the possessions of the whole clan. However, by taking part in the feast the other clan incurs the obligation to give a potlatch on a still grander scale. Should it fail to do so it forfeits its name, its honour, its badge and totems, even its civil and religious rights. The upshot of all this is that the possessions of the tribe circulate among the houses of the "quality" in an adventurous way. It is to be assumed that originally the potlatch was always held between two phratrïai.

In the potlatch one proves one's superiority not merely by the lavish prodigality of one's gifts but, what is even more striking, by the wholesale destruction of one's possessions just to show that one can do without them. These destructions, too, are executed

¹*Op. cit.* p. 255.

²The name was chosen more or less arbitrarily from a number of terms in different Indian dialects. Cf. G. Davy, *La Foi jurée*, Thèse, Paris, 1923; *Des Clans aux Empires (L'Évolution de l'Humanité, No. 6)*, 1923; M. Mauss, *Essai sur le Don, Forme archaïque de l'échange (L'Année Sociologique, N.S. 1)*, 1923-4.

with dramatic ritual and are accompanied by haughty challenges. The action always takes the form of a contest: if one chieftain breaks a copper pot, or burns a pile of blankets, or smashes a canoe, his opponent is under an obligation to destroy at least as much or more if possible. A man will defiantly send the potsherds to his rival or display them as a mark of honour. It is related of the Tlinkit, a tribe akin to the Kwakiutl, that if a chieftain wanted to affront a rival he would kill a number of his own slaves, whereupon the other, to avenge himself, had to kill an even greater number of his.¹

Such competitions in unbridled liberality, with the frivolous destruction of one's own goods as the climax, are to be found all over the world in more or less obvious traces. Marcel Mauss was able to point to customs exactly like the potlatch, in Melanesia. In his *Essai sur le don* he found traces of similar customs in Greek, Roman and Old Germanic culture. Granet has evidence of both giving and destroying matches in Ancient Chinese tradition.² In the pagan Arabia of pre-Islamic times they are to be met with under a special name, which proves their existence as a formal institution. They are called *mu'āqara*, a *nomen actionis* of the verb *'aqara* in the third form, rendered in the old lexicons, which knew nothing of the ethnological background, by the phrase "to rival in glory by cutting the feet of camels".³ Mauss neatly sums up Held's theme by saying: "The *Mahābhārata* is the story of a gigantic potlatch".

The potlatch and everything connected with it hinges on winning, on being superior, on glory, prestige and, last but not least, revenge. Always, even when only one person is the feast-giver, there are two groups standing in opposition but bound by a spirit of hostility and friendship combined. In order to understand this ambivalent attitude we must recognize that the essential feature of the potlatch is the winning of it. The opposed groups do not contend for wealth or power but simply for the pleasure of parading their superiority—in a word, for glory. At the wedding of a Mamalekala chieftain described by Boas,⁴ the guest-group declares itself "ready to begin the fray", meaning the ceremony at the end of which the prospective father-in-law gives away the

¹Davy, *La Foi jurée*, p. 177.

²*Chinese Civilization*, p. 156.

³G. W. Freytag, *Lexicon Arabico-latinum*, Halle, 1830, i.v. *aqara*: de gloria certavit in incidendis camelorum pedibus.

⁴Quoted by Davy, *op. cit.*, p. 119 f.

Kula

Livy complaining of the prodigal luxury of the *ludi publici* as degenerating into crazy rivalry;¹ Cleopatra going one better than Mark Anthony by dissolving her pearl in vinegar; Philip of Burgundy crowning a series of banquets given by his nobles with his own Gargantuan feast at Lille, when the *voeux du faisan*, or "students" as we would call them, indulged in a ceremonial smashing of glassware—all these instances display, in the forms appropriate to their respective times and civilizations, the real *potlatch* spirit, if you like. Or would it not be truer and simpler to refrain from making a cant-word of this term and to regard the potlatch proper as the most highly developed and explicit form of a fundamental human need, which I would call playing for honour and glory? A technical term like potlatch, once accepted in scientific parlance, all too readily becomes a label for shelving an article as filed and finally accounted for.

The play quality of the "gift ritual" found all over the earth has emerged with singular clarity since Malinowski gave a vivacious and extremely circumstantial account in his masterly *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, of the so-called *kula* system which he observed among the Trobriand Islanders and their neighbours in Melanesia. The *kula* is a ceremonial voyage starting at fixed times from one of the island groups east of New Guinea and going in two opposite directions. Its purpose is the mutual exchange, by the various tribes concerned, of certain articles having no economic value either as necessities or useful implements, but highly prized as precious and notorious ornaments. These ornaments are necklaces of red, and bracelets of white, shells. Many of them bear names, like the famous gems of Western history. In the *kula* they pass temporarily from the possession of one group into that of the other, which thereby takes upon itself the obligation to pass them on within a certain space of time to the next link in the *kula* chain. The objects have a sacred value, are possessed of magic powers, and each has a history relating how it was first won, etc. Some of them are so precious that their entry into the gift-cycle causes a sensation.² The whole proceeding is accompanied by all kinds of formalities interspersed with feasting and magic, in an atmosphere of mutual obligation and trust. Hospitality abounds, and at the end of the ceremony everybody feels he has had his

¹Book vii, 2, 13.

²The objects in the *kula* custom may perhaps be compared with what the ethnologists call *Renommiegeld*—bragging-money.

full share of honour and glory. The voyage itself is often adventurous and beset with perils. The entire cultural treasury of the tribes concerned is bound up with the *kula*, it comprises their ornamental carving of canoes, their poetry, their code of honour and manners. Some trading in useful articles attaches itself to the *kula* voyages, but only incidentally. Nowhere else, perhaps, does an archaic community take on the lineaments of a noble game more purely than with these Papuans of Melanesia. Competition expresses itself in a form so pure and unalloyed that it seems to excel all similar customs practised by peoples much more advanced in civilization. At the root of this sacred rite we recognize unmistakably the imperishable need of man to live in beauty. There is no satisfying this need save in play.

From the life of childhood right up to the highest achievements of civilization one of the strongest incentives to perfection, both individual and social, is the desire to be praised and honoured for one's excellence. In praising another each praises himself. We want to be honoured for our virtues. We want the satisfaction of having done something well. Doing something well means doing it better than others. In order to excel one must prove one's excellence; in order to merit recognition, merit must be made manifest. Competition serves to give proof of superiority. This is particularly true of archaic society.

In archaic periods, of course, the virtue that renders one worthy of honour is not the abstract idea of moral perfection as measured by the commandments of a supreme heavenly power. The idea of virtue, as the word for it in the Germanic languages shows, is still, in its current connotation, inextricably bound up with the *idiosyncrasy* of a thing. *Tugend* in German (*deugd* in Dutch) corresponds directly to the verb *taugen* (*deugen*), meaning to be fit or apt for something, to be the true and genuine thing in one's kind. Such is the sense of the Greek ἀρετή and the Middle High German *tugende*. Every thing has its ἀρετή that is specific of it, proper to its kind.¹ A horse, a dog, the eye, the axe, the bow—each has its proper virtue. Strength and health are the virtues of the body; wit and sagacity those of the mind. Etymologically, ἀρετή is connected with ἀριστος: the best, the most excellent.²

¹One might suggest that the closest English equivalent of the German *Tugend*, apart from the word "virtue" itself, is "property". Trans.

²Cf. Werner Jaeger, *Paideia i*, Oxford, 1939, p. 3 ff.; R. W. Livingstone, *Greek Ideals and Modern Life*, Oxford, 1935, p. 102 f.

The virtue of a man of quality consists in the set of properties which make him fit to fight and command. Among these liberality, wisdom and justice occupy a high place. It is perfectly natural that with many peoples the word for virtue derives from the idea of manliness or "virility", as for instance the Latin *virtus*, which retained its meaning of "courage" for a very long time—until, in fact, Christian thought became dominant. The same is true of the Arabic *murū'a*, comprising, like the Greek ἀρετή, the whole semantic complex of strength, valour, wealth, right, good management, morality, urbanity, fine manners, magnanimity, liberality and moral perfection. In every archaic community that is healthy, being based on the tribal life of warriors and nobles, there will blossom an ideal of chivalry and chivalrous conduct, whether it be in Greece, Arabia, Japan or mediaeval Christendom. And this virile ideal of virtue will always be bound up with the conviction that honour, to be valid, must be publicly acknowledged and forcibly maintained if need be. Even in Aristotle honour is called the "prize of virtue".¹ His thought is, of course, far above the level of archaic culture. He does not call honour the aim or basis of virtue, but the natural measure of it. "Men crave honour," he says, "in order to persuade themselves of their own worth, their virtue. They aspire to be honoured by persons of judgement and in virtue of their real value."²

Consequently virtue, honour, nobility and glory fall at the outset within the field of competition, which is that of play. The life of the young warrior of noble birth is a continual exercise in virtue and a continual struggle for the sake of the honour of his rank. The ideal is perfectly expressed in the well-known line of Homer: αἰὲν ἀριστεύειν καὶ ὑπείροχον ἔμμεναι ἄλλων ("always to be the best and to excel others"). Hence the interest of the epic depends not on the war exploits as such but on the ἀριστεία of the individual heroes.

Training for aristocratic living leads to training for life in the State and for the State. Here too ἀρετή is not as yet entirely ethical. It still means above all the *fitness* of the citizen for his tasks in the *polis*, and the idea it originally contained of exercise by means of contests still retains much of its old weight.

That nobility is based on virtue is implicit from the very beginning of both concepts and right through their evolution, only the meaning of virtue changes as civilization unfolds. Gradually the

¹*Eth. Nic.* iv, 1123 D 35.

²*Ibid.* i, 1095 D 26.

idea of virtue acquires another content: it rises to the ethical and religious plane. The nobility, who once lived up to their ideal of virtue merely by being brave and vindicating their honour, must now, if they are to remain true to their tasks and to themselves, either enrich the ideal of chivalry by assimilating into it those higher standards of ethics and religion (an attempt which usually turned out lamentably enough in practice!) or else content themselves with cultivating an outward semblance of high living and spotless honour by means of pomp, magnificence and courtly manners. The ever-present play-element, originally a real factor in the shaping of their culture, has now become mere show and parade.

The nobleman demonstrates his "virtue" by feats of strength, skill, courage, wit, wisdom, wealth or liberality. For want of these he may yet excel in a contest of words, that is to say, he may either himself praise the virtues in which he wishes to excel his rivals, or have them praised for him by a poet or a herald. This boasting of one's own virtue as a form of contest slips over quite naturally into contumely of one's adversary, and this in its turn becomes a contest in its own right. It is remarkable how large a place these bragging and scoffing matches occupy in the most diverse civilizations. Their play-character is beyond dispute: we have only to think of the doings of little boys to qualify such slanging-matches as a form of play. All the same, we must distinguish carefully between the formal boasting or scoffing tournament and the more spontaneous bravado which used to inaugurate or accompany a fight with weapons, though it is not at all easy to draw the line. According to ancient Chinese texts, the pitched battle is a confused mêlée of boasts, insults, altruism and compliments. It is rather a contest with moral weapons, a collision of offended honours, than an armed combat.¹ All sorts of actions, some of the most singular nature, have a technical significance as marks of shame or honour for him who perpetrates or suffers them. Thus, the contemptuous gesture of Remus in jumping over Romulus' wall at the dawn of Roman history constitutes, in Chinese military tradition, an obligatory challenge. A variant of it shows the warrior riding up to his enemy's gate and calmly counting the planks with his whip.² In the same tradition are the citizens of Meaux, standing on the wall and shaking the

¹Granet, *Chinese Civilization*, p. 270.

²*Ibid.* p. 267.

properly called *hidja*'. Contests for honour, the *mufākhara*, used to be held at fixed times, simultaneously with the yearly fairs and after the pilgrimages. Whole tribes or clans might compete, or simply individuals. Whenever two groups happened to meet they opened the proceedings with a match of honour. There was an official spokesman for each group, the *sha'ir*—poet or orator—who played an important part. The custom clearly had a ritual character. It served to keep alive the powerful social tensions that held the pre-Islamic culture of Arabia together. But the onset of Islam opposed this ancient practice by giving it a new religious trend or reducing it to a courtly game. In pagan times the *mufākhara* frequently ended in murder and tribal war.

The *munāfara* is primarily a form of contest in which the two parties dispute their claims to honour before a judge or arbitrator: the verb from which the word is derived has the connotations of decision and judgement. A stake is set, or a theme for discussion fixed; for instance, who is of the noblest descent?—the prize being a hundred camels.¹ As in a lawsuit the parties stand up and sit down in turns while, to make the proceedings more impressive, each is supported by witnesses acting under oath. Later, in Islamic times, the judges frequently refused to act: the litigious pair were derided as being "two fools desiring evil". Sometimes the *munāfara* were held in rhyme. Clubs were formed for the express purpose first of staging a *mufākhara* (match of honour), then a *munāfara* (mutual vilification) which often ended in the sword.²

Greek tradition has numerous traces of ceremonial and festal slanging-matches. The word *iambos* is held by some to have meant originally "derision", with particular reference to the public skits and scurrilous songs which formed part of the feasts of Demeter and Dionysus. The biting satire of Archilochus is supposed to have developed out of this slating in public. Thus, from an immemorial custom of ritual nature, iambic poetry became an instrument of public criticism. Further, at the feasts of Demeter and Apollo, men and women chanted songs of mutual derision, which may have given rise to the literary theme of the diatribe against womankind.

Old Germanic tradition, too, affords a very ancient vestige of

¹G. W. Freytag, *Einleitung in das Studium der arabischen Sprache bis Mohammed*, p. 184, Bonn, 1861.

²*Kitāb al Aghāni*, Cairo, 1905-6, iv, 8; viii, 109 sq.; xv, 52, 57.

IV

PLAY AND LAW

AT FIRST sight few things would seem to be further apart than the domain of law, justice and jurisprudence, and play. High seriousness, deadly earnest and the vital interests of the individual and society reign supreme in everything that pertains to the law. The etymological foundation of most of the words which express the ideas of law and justice lies in the sphere of setting, fixing, establishing, stating, appointing, holding, ordering, choosing, dividing, binding, etc. All these ideas would seem to have little or no connection with, indeed to be opposed to, the semantic sphere which gives rise to the words for play. However, as we have observed all along, the sacredness and seriousness of an action by no means preclude its play-quality.

That an affinity may exist between law and play becomes obvious to us as soon as we realize how much the actual practice of the law, in other words a lawsuit, properly resembles a contest whatever the ideal foundations of the law may be. We have already touched on the possible relationship of the contest to the rise of a law-system in our description of the potlatch, which Davy approaches exclusively from the juristic point of view as a primitive system of contract and obligation.¹ In Greece, litigation was considered as an agon, a contest bound by fixed rules and sacred in form, where the two contending parties invoked the decision of an arbiter. Such a conception of the lawsuit must not be regarded as a later development, a mere transfer of ideas, let alone the degeneration that Ehrenberg seems to think it is.² On the contrary, the whole development goes in the opposite direction, for the juridical process started by being a contest and the agonistic nature of it is alive even to-day.

Contest means play. As we have seen, there is no sufficient reason to deny any contest whatsoever the character of play. The playful and the contending, lifted on to the plane of that sacred seriousness which every society demands for its justice, are still discernible to-day in all forms of judicial life. The pronouncement

¹Davy, *La Foi jurée*.

²*Ost und West*, p. 76; cf. p. 71.

of justice takes place in a "court", for a start. This court is still, in the full sense of the word, the ἱερὸς κύκλος, the sacred circle within which the judges are shown sitting, in the shield of Achilles.¹ Every place from which justice is pronounced is a veritable *temenos*, a sacred spot cut off and hedged in from the "ordinary" world. The old Flemish and Dutch word for it is *vierschaaar*, literally a space divided off by four ropes or, according to another view, by four benches. But whether square or round it is still a magic circle, a play-ground where the customary differences of rank are temporarily abolished. Whoever steps inside it is sacrosanct for the time being. Before Loki launched forth on his slanging-match he made sure that the spot on which he did so was a "great place of peace".² The English House of Lords is virtually still a court of justice; hence the Woolsack, the seat of the Lord Chancellor who really has no business there, is reckoned as "technically outside the precincts of the House".

Judges about to administer justice step outside "ordinary" life as soon as they don wig and gown. I do not know whether the costume of the English judge and barrister has been the subject of ethnological investigation. It seems to me that it has little to do with the vogue for wigs in the 17th and 18th centuries. The judge's wig is rather a survival of the mediaeval head-dress worn by lawyers in England, called the coif, which was originally a close-fitting white cap. A vestige of this is still present in the little white edging at the rim of the wig. The judge's wig, however, is more than a mere relic of antiquated professional dress. Functionally it has close connections with the dancing masks of savages. It transforms the wearer into another "being". And it is by no means the only very ancient feature which the strong sense of tradition so peculiar to the British has preserved in law. The sporting element and the humour so much in evidence in British legal practice is one of the basic features of law in archaic society. Of course this element is not wholly lacking in the popular tradition of other countries as well. Even law proceedings on the Continent, though much more persistently serious than in England, bear traces of it. The style and language in which the juristic wranglings of a modern lawsuit are couched often betray a sportsmanlike passion for indulging in argument and counter-

¹*Iliad*, xviii, 504.

²Cf. Jaeger, *Paideia*, i, p. 104: ". . . the ideal of *dike* is used as a standard in public life by which both high-born and low-born men are measured as 'equals'."

argument, some of them highly sophistical, which has reminded a legal friend of mine, a judge, of the Javanese *adat*. Here, he says, the spokesmen poke little sticks into the ground at each well-aimed argument, so that he who has accumulated most sticks carries the day victoriously. The play-character of legal proceedings was faithfully observed by Goethe in his description of a sitting of a Venetian court in the Doge's Palace.¹

These few random remarks may prepare us for the very real connection between jurisdiction and play. Let us turn back once more to the archaic forms of legal procedure. Any proceeding before a judge will always and in all circumstances be dominated by the intense desire of each party to gain his cause. The desire to win is so strong that the agonistic factor cannot be discounted for a single moment. If this does not of itself suffice to disclose the connection between legal justice and play, the formal characteristics of the law as practised lend added weight to our contention. The judicial contest is always subject to a system of restrictive rules which, quite apart from the limitations of time and place, set the lawsuit firmly and squarely in the domain of orderly, antithetical play. The active association of law and play, particularly in archaic culture, can be seen from three points of view. The lawsuit can be regarded as a game of chance, a contest, or a verbal battle.

We moderns cannot conceive justice apart from abstract righteousness, however feeble our conception of it may be. For us, the lawsuit is primarily a dispute about right and wrong; winning and losing take only a second place. Now it is precisely this preoccupation with ethical values that we must abandon if we are to understand archaic justice. Turning our eyes from the administration of justice in highly developed civilizations to that which obtains in less advanced phases of culture, we see that the idea of right and wrong, the ethical-judicial conception, comes to be overshadowed by the idea of winning and losing, that is, the purely agonistic conception. It is not so much the abstract question of right and wrong that occupies the archaic mind as the very concrete question of winning or losing. Once given this feeble ethical standard the agonistic factor will gain enormously in legal practice the further back we go; and as the agonistic element increases so does the element of chance, with the result that we soon find ourselves in the play-sphere. We are confronted by a

¹*Italienische Reise*, Oct. 3rd.

mental world in which the notion of decision by oracles, by the judgement of God, by ordeal, by sortilege—i.e. by *play*—and the notion of decision by judicial sentence, fuse in a single complex of thought. Justice is made subservient—and quite sincerely—to the rules of the game. We still acknowledge the incontrovertibility of such decisions when, failing to make up our minds, we resort to drawing lots or “tossing up”.

Divine Will, destiny and chance seem more or less distinct to us, at least we try to distinguish between them as concepts. To the archaic mind, however, they are more or less equivalent. “Fate” may be known by eliciting some pronouncement from it. An oracular decision of this kind is arrived at by trying out the uncertain prospects of success. You draw sticks, or cast stones, or prick between the pages of the Holy Book, and the oracle will respond. In Exodus xxviii 30, Moses is bidden “to put in the breastplate of judgement the Urim and Thummim” (whatever they were), so that Aaron “shall bear the judgement of the children of Israel upon his heart before the Lord continually”. The breastplate is worn by the High Priest, and it is with this that the priest Eleazer asks for advice, in Numbers xxvii 21, on behalf of Joshua, “after the judgement of Urim”. Likewise in 1 Samuel xiv 42, Saul orders lots to be cast as between himself and his son Jonathan. The relations between oracle, chance and judgement are illustrated very clearly in these instances. Pre-Islamic Arabia also knew this kind of sortilege.¹ Finally, is not the sacred balance in which Zeus, in the Iliad, weighs men’s chances of death before the battle begins, much the same? “Then the Father strung the two golden scales and put into them the two portions of bitter death, one for the stallion-subduing Trojans and one for the bronze-bearing Achaeans.”²

This weighing or *pondering* of Zeus is at the same time his judging (*δικάζειν*). The ideas of Divine Will, fate and chance are perfectly fused here. The scales of justice—a metaphor born undoubtedly of this Homeric image—are the emblem of uncertain chance, which is “in the balance”. There is no question at this stage of the triumph of moral truth, or any idea that right weighs more heavily than wrong—a notion that was to come much later.

One of the devices on the shield of Achilles as described in the eighteenth book of the Iliad, represents a legal proceeding with

¹J. Wellhausen, *Reste arabischen Heidentums*, Berlin, 1927, p. 132.

²Iliad, viii, 69; cf. xx, 209; xvi, 658; xix, 223.

judges sitting within the sacred circle, and at the centre of this there are "two talents of gold" (δύο χρυσοῦ τάλαντα) for him who pronounces the most righteous judgement.¹ These are commonly interpreted as being the sum of money for which the parties concerned are pleading. But, all things considered, they would seem to be rather a stake or a prize than an object of litigation; hence they are better suited to a game of lots than to a judicial session. Further, it is worth noting that *talanta* originally meant "scales". I am inclined to think, therefore, that the poet had a vase-painting in mind which showed two litigants sitting on either side of an actual pair of scales, the veritable "scales of justice" where judgement was done by weighing according to the primitive custom—in other words by oracle of lot. This custom was no longer understood at the time of the making of those lines, with the result that *talanta* were conceived, by a transposition of meanings, as money.

The Greek *δίκη* (right, justice) has a scale of meanings which range from the purely abstract to something very concrete indeed. It may signify justice as an abstract concept, or an equitable share, or indemnification, or even more: the parties to a lawsuit give and take *δίκη*, the judge allots *δίκη*. It also means the legal process itself, the verdict and the punishment. Though we might suppose the more concrete significations of a word to be the more original, as regards *diké* Werner Jaeger takes the opposite view. According to him, the abstract meaning is the primary one, from which the concrete is derived.² This does not seem to me to be compatible with the fact that it is precisely the abstractions—*δικαιος*, righteous, and *δικαιοσύνη*, righteousness—that were subsequently formed from *diké*. The relationship discussed above between the administration of justice and the casting of lots ought surely to dispose us, rather, in the direction of the etymology expressly rejected by Jaeger, which derives *δίκη* from *δίκεῖν*, to cast or throw, although there is obviously an affinity between *δίκη* and *δείκνυμι*. Hebrew, too, has a similar association of "right" and "casting", for *thorah* (right, justice, law) has unmistakable affinities with a root that means casting lots, shooting, and the pronouncement of an oracle.³

It is also significant that, on coins, the figure of *Diké* sometimes turns into that of *Tyche*, the goddess of uncertain fate. She too

¹xviii, 497-509.

²*Paideia*, i, p. 103.

³The word *urim* may perhaps come from this root.

of every contest, be it a trial of strength or a game of chance, is a sacred decision vouchsafed by the gods. We still fall into this habit of thought when we accept a rule that runs: unanimity decides the issue, or when we accept a majority vote. Only in a more advanced phase of religious experience will the formula run: the contest (or ordeal) is a revelation of truth and justice because some deity is directing the fall of the dice or the outcome of the battle. So that when Ehrenberg says that "secular justice springs from the ordeal"¹ he would seem to be inverting, or at least straining, the historical sequence of ideas. Would it not be truer to say that the pronouncing of judgement (and hence legal justice itself) and trial by ordeal both have their roots in agonistic decision, where the outcome of the contest—whether by lots, chance, or a trial of some kind (strength, endurance, etc.)—speaks the final word? The struggle to win is itself holy. But once it is animated by clear conceptions of right and wrong the struggle rises into the sphere of law; and seen in the light of positive conceptions regarding Divine Power it rises into the sphere of faith. In all this, however, the primary thing is play, which is the seed of that ideal growth.

Sometimes the legal dispute in archaic society takes the form of a wager or even a race. The idea of a wager is always forcing itself upon us in this connection, as we saw when describing the potlatch, where the mutual challenges bring about a primitive system of contract and liability. But apart from the potlatch and the ordeal proper, over and over again in primitive legal customs we come across the contest for justice, that is to say, for a decision and the recognition of a stable relationship in a particular instance. Otto Gierke collected a great many strange examples of this blending of play and justice under the title of "Humour in Law". He considered them merely as illustrating the playfulness of the "popular spirit", but actually they only find their rightful explanation in the agonistic origin of the legal function. The popular spirit is certainly playful, though in a far deeper sense than Gierke supposed; and this playfulness is pregnant with meaning. Thus, for example, it was an old Germanic legal custom to establish the "marke" or boundary of a village or piece of land by running a race or throwing an axe. Or else the justice of a person's claim was tested by making him touch, blindfolded, a particular person or object, or roll an egg. In all these instances we are dealing with judgement by trial of strength or play of chance.

¹*Die Reichsidee im frühen Griechentum*, Leipzig, 1912, p. 75.

It is certainly no accident that contests play a particularly important part in the choosing of a bride or bridegroom. The English word "wedding", like the Dutch "bruiloft", harks back to the dawn of legal and social history. "Wedding," derived from the Anglo-Saxon *wed* and ultimately from the Latin *vadium*, speaks of the "pledge" or "gage" with which one bound oneself to keep an "engagement" already contracted. *Bruiloft*—wedding-party—is the exact equivalent of the Old English *brydhleap*, Old Norse *brudhlaup*, Old High German *brutlouft*, meaning the race run for the bride, this being one of the trials on which the contract depended. The Danaids were won by a race and so, according to tradition, was Penelope.¹ The point is not whether such actions are mythical or legendary merely, or can be proved to have been a living custom, but the fact that the idea of a race for the bride exists at all. To archaic man marriage is a "contrat à épreuves, a potlatch custom", as the ethnologists say. The *Mahābhārata* describes the trials of strength which the wooers of Draupadi have to undergo, the *Ramayana* likewise with regard to Sita, and the *Nibelungenlied* does the same for Brunhild.

But it is not necessarily in strength and courage alone that the wooer is tested in order to win the bride. Sometimes he is also tested in knowledge and ready wit by having to answer difficult questions. According to Nguyen van Huyen, such contests play a large part in the festivities of young men and girls in Annam. Very often the girl holds a regular examination of her swain. In Eddic lore, though of course in somewhat different form, there is an instance of a similar trial in knowledge for the sake of the bride. Alvis, the all-wise dwarf, is promised Thor's daughter if he can answer all the questions that Thor puts to him regarding the secret names of things. There is a further variation of the theme in the *Fjölsvinnsmal*, where the young man venturing forth on his perilous courtship puts questions to the giant who guards the virgin.

Let us now pass from the contest to the wager, which in its turn is closely connected with the vow. The wagering element in legal proceedings expresses itself in two ways. Firstly, the principal person in a lawsuit "wagers his right", i.e. he challenges the other party to dispute it, by laying a "gage"—*vadium*. Right up to the 19th century, English law knew two forms of action in civil suits

¹J. E. Harrison, *Themis*, p. 232. Cf. Frobenius, *Kulturgeschichte Afrikas*, p. 429, for a Nubian tale to this effect.

arguments for the intimate connections between culture and play, namely the drumming-matches or singing-matches of the Greenland Eskimo. We shall deal rather more extensively with this because here we have a practice still in living use (at least it was until recently) in which the cultural function we know as jurisdiction has not yet separated from the sphere of play.¹

When an Eskimo has a complaint to make against another he challenges him to a drumming-contest (Danish: *Trommesang*). The clan or tribe thereupon gathers at a festal meeting, all in their finest attire and in joyful mood. The two contestants then attack one another in turn with opprobrious songs to the accompaniment of a drum, each reproaching the other with his misdemeanours. No distinction is made between well-founded accusations, satirical remarks calculated to tickle the audience, and pure slander. For instance one singer enumerated all the people who had been eaten by his opponent's wife and mother-in-law during a famine, which caused the assembled company to burst into tears. This offensive chanting is accompanied throughout by all kinds of physical indignities directed against your opponent, such as breathing and snorting into his face, bumping him with your forehead, prizing his jaws open, tying him to a tent-pole—all of which the "accused" has to bear with equanimity and a mocking laugh. Most of the spectators join in the refrains of the song, applauding and egging the parties on. Others just sit there and go to sleep. During the pauses the contestants converse in friendly terms. The sessions of such a contest may extend over a period of years, during which the parties think up new songs and new misdeeds to denounce. Finally the spectators decide who the winner is. In most cases friendship is immediately re-established, but it sometimes happens that a family emigrates from shame at having been defeated. A person may have several drumming-matches running at the same time. Women too can take part.

It is of first-rate importance here that among the tribes that practise them these contests take the place of judicial decisions. Apart from the drumming-matches there is no form of jurisdiction whatsoever. They are the sole means of settling a dispute, and

¹Thalbitzer, *The Ammassalik Eskimo*, Meddelelser om Gronland xxxix, 1914; Birket Smith, *The Caribou Esquimaux*, Copenhagen, 1929; Knud Rasmussen, *Fra Gronland till Sülle Havet*, i-ii, 1925-6; *The Netsilik Eskimo*, Report of the Fifth Thule Expedition 1921-4, viii, 1, 2; Herbert König, *Der Rechtsbruch und sein Ausgleich bei den Eskimos*, Anthropos xix-xx, 1924-5.

there is no other way of moulding public opinion.¹ Even murders are delated in this curious manner. No sentence of any kind follows the victory in a drumming-match. In the great majority of cases these contests are occasioned by women's gossip. There is some distinction to be made between tribes which know the custom as a means of justice and those which know it only as a festal entertainment. Another difference concerns the licit degrees of violence: with some tribes beating is permitted, with others the plaintiff may only bind his opponent, etc. Finally, besides the drumming-match, boxing or wrestling occasionally serve to compose a quarrel.

Here, therefore, we are dealing with a cultural practice which fulfils the judicial function perfectly in agonistic form and yet is play in the most proper sense. Everything passes off amid laughter and in the greatest jollity, for the whole point is to keep the audience amused. "Next time," says Igsvik in Thalbitzer's book,¹ "I shall make a new song. It will be extremely funny, and I shall tie the other fellow to a tent-pole." Indeed, the drumming-matches are the chief source of amusement for the whole community. Failing a quarrel, they are started for the sheer fun of the thing. Sometimes, as a special show of ingenuity, they are sung in riddles.

Not so far removed from the Eskimo drumming-matches are those satirical and comic sessions that used to be held in peasant courts, particularly in Germanic countries, where all sorts of minor offences were judged and punished, mostly sexual ones. The best known of these is the "Haberfeldtreiben". That they are situated midway between play and seriousness is evidenced by the "Saugericht" of the young men of Rapperswil, from which appeal could be made to the Petty Sessions of the town.²

It is clear that the Eskimo drumming-match belongs to the same sphere as the potlatch, the pre-Islamic bragging and slanging matches, the Old Norse *mannjafnaðr* and the Icelandic *nidsang* (hymn of hate), as well as the ancient Chinese contests. It is equally clear that these customs had originally little in common with the ordeal, in the sense of a divine judgement brought about by a miracle. The idea of divine judgement in the matter of

¹Birket Smith, *op. cit.* p. 264, seems to define "judicial proceedings" too sharply when he says that among the Caribou Eskimos the drumming-matches are lacking in this respect because they were only "a simple act of vengeance" or for the purpose of "securing quiet and order".

²Stumpff, *op. cit.* p. 16.

PLAY AND WAR

EVER since words existed for fighting and playing, men have been wont to call war a game. We have already posed the question whether this is to be regarded only as a metaphor, and come to a negative conclusion. Language everywhere must have expressed matters in that way from the moment words for combat and play existed.

The two ideas often seem to blend absolutely in the archaic mind. Indeed, all fighting that is bound by rules bears the formal characteristics of play by that very limitation. We can call it the most intense, the most energetic form of play and at the same time the most palpable and primitive. Young dogs and small boys fight "for fun", with rules limiting the degree of violence; nevertheless the limits of licit violence do not necessarily stop at the spilling of blood or even at killing. The mediaeval tournament was always regarded as a sham-fight, hence as play, but in its earliest forms it is reasonably certain that the joustings were held in deadly earnest and fought out to the death, like the "playing" of the young men before Abner and Joab. As a striking instance of the play-element in fighting taken from a not too remote period of history, we would refer to the famous "Combat des Trente" fought in Brittany in 1351. I have not found it expressly styled as "play" in the sources, but the whole performance has the features of a game. So has the equally famous "Disfida di Barletta" of the year 1503, where thirteen Italian knights met thirteen French knights.¹ Fighting, as a cultural function, always presupposes limiting rules, and it requires, to a certain extent anyway, the recognition of its play-quality. We can only speak of war as a cultural function so long as it is waged within a sphere whose members regard each other as equals or antagonists with equal rights; in other words its cultural function depends on its play-quality. This condition changes as soon as war is waged outside the sphere of equals, against groups not recognized as human

¹See my *Herbst des Mittelalters (The Waning of the Middle Ages)*, 4th edition, Stuttgart, 1938, p. 141.

beings and thus deprived of human rights—barbarians, devils, heathens, heretics and “lesser breeds without the law”. In such circumstances war loses its play-quality altogether and can only remain within the bounds of civilization in so far as the parties to it accept certain limitations for the sake of their own honour. Until recently the “law of nations” was generally held to constitute such a system of limitation, recognizing as it did the ideal of a community of mankind with rights and claims for all, and expressly separating the state of war—by declaring it—from peace on the one hand and criminal violence on the other. It remained for the theory of “total war” to banish war’s cultural function and extinguish the last vestige of the play-element.

If we are right in considering the ludic function to be inherent in the agon, the question now arises how far war (in our view, a development of the agon) can be called an agonistic function of society? Several forms of combat at once suggest themselves as being non-agonistic: the surprise, the ambush, the raid, the punitive expedition and wholesale extermination cannot be described as agonistic forms of warfare, though they may be subservient to an agonistic war. Moreover the political objectives of war also lie outside the immediate sphere of contest: conquest, subjection or domination of another people. The agonistic element only becomes operative when the war-making parties regard themselves and each other as *antagonists* contending for something to which they feel they have a right. This feeling is almost always present, though it is often exploited only as a pretext. Even when sheer hunger moves to war—a comparatively rare phenomenon—the aggressors will interpret it, and perhaps sincerely feel it, as a holy war, a war of honour, divine retribution and what not. History and sociology tend to exaggerate the part played in the origin of wars, ancient or modern, by immediate material interests and the lust for power. Though the statesmen who plan the war may themselves regard it as a question of power-politics, in the great majority of cases the real motives are to be found less in the “necessities” of economic expansion, etc., than in pride and vain-glory, the desire for prestige and all the pomps of superiority. The great wars of aggression from antiquity down to our own times all find a far more essential explanation in the idea of glory, which everybody understands, than in any rational and intellectualist theory of economic forces and political dynamisms. The modern outbursts of glorifying war, so lamentably familiar to us, carry us



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