



Play and Seriousness

Dr. Kurt Riezler's valuable discussion under this heading in the *Journal of Philosophy*, XXXVIII (1941), 505-517, and my own "*Lilā*," deal with complementary aspects of the notion of playful activity; the points of view converge and meet in the citation from Heraclitus made by both authors [see p. 148n.—ED.].

Dr. Riezler's interest lies mainly in the distinction of (mere) play from (real) seriousness; mine in the indistinction of play and work on a higher level of reference. In the sense that the divine part of us, our real Self, or "Soul of the soul" is the impassible spectator of the fates that are undergone by its psychophysical vehicles (MU II.7, III.2, etc.), it is clearly not "interested" or involved in these fates, and does not take them seriously; just as any other playgoer does not take the fates of the stage characters seriously, or if he does can hardly be said to be looking on at the play, but is involved in it. It is surely with reference to this best part of us, with which we identify ourselves if we "know who we are," that Plato says more than once that "human affairs ought not to be taken very seriously" (*μεγάλης μὲν σπουδῆς οὐκ ἄλζια*, *Laws* 803c, cf. *Apology* 23a), and that we are asked to "take no thought for the morrow" (Matt. 6:34).

We must not confuse such a lack of "interest" with what we mean by "apathy" and the inertia that we suppose must be the consequence of such an ataraxia. All that "apathy" really implies is, of course, an independence of pleasure-pain motivation; it does not exclude the notion of an activity *κατὰ φύσιν*, but only that of an activity compelled by conditions not of our own choosing. Apathy is spiritual equipoise and a freedom from sentimentality. We are still aware that a disinterested statesman will make a better ruler than one who has "interests" of his own to be furthered; "tyranny is monarchy ruling in the interest of the monarch" (Aristotle, *Politics* III.5). The good actor is one for whom "the

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play's the thing," not one who sees in it an opportunity to exhibit himself. The physician calls in another medical man to operate on a member of his family, just because the stranger will be less "interested" in the fate of his wife or child and therefore better able to play his game with death. "It is contrary to the nature of the arts to seek the good of anything but their object" (Plato, *Republic* 342bc).

Games are insignificant to us. But that is abnormal; and if we are to consider play and seriousness from a more universally human point of view we must remember that "games"—and this covers the whole circus of athletic contests, acrobatic and theatrical performances, jugglery, chess, gambling, and most of the organized games of children and the folk, all in fact that is not merely the artless gamboling of lambs¹—are not "merely" physical exercises, spectacles, or amusements, or merely of hygienic or aesthetic value, but metaphysically significant. Plato asks, "Are we to live always at play? and if so, at what sort of games?" and answers, "such as sacrifices, chanting, and dancing, by which we can win the favor of the gods and overcome our foes" (*Laws* 803de). *Ludus* underlies our word "ludicrous"; but in the Latin Dictionary (Harper) we find "*Ludi*, public games, plays, spectacles, shows, exhibitions, which were given in honor of the gods, etc."

Although, then, in a game there is nothing to be gained except "the pleasure that perfects the operation," and the understanding of what is properly a rite, we do not therefore play carelessly, but rather as if our life depended upon victory. Play implies order; of a man who ignores the rules (as he may be tempted to do if the result is to him the matter of primary importance) we say that he is "not playing the game"; if we are so much in earnest, so much "interested" in the stakes, as to "hit below the belt," that is not duelling, but nearer to attempted murder. It is true that by not cheating we may lose: but the whole point of the game is that we are not playing only to win, but playing a part, determined by our own nature, and that our only concern is to play well, regardless of the result, which we can not foresee. "Mastery is of action only, not of its fruits; so neither let the fruit of action be thy motive, nor hesitate to act" (BG II.47). "Battles are lost in the same spirit in which they are won" (Whitman); victory depends on many factors beyond

¹ Cf. Otto Ranke, *Art and Artist*, New York, 1932, ch. 10, "Game and Destiny," and Coomaraswamy, "The Symbolism of Archery," 1943.

our control, and we ought not to be concerned about what we are not responsible for.

The activity of God is called a "game" precisely because it is assumed that *he* has no ends of his own to serve; it is in the same sense that our life can be "played," and that insofar as the best part of us is in it, but not of it, our life becomes a game. At this point we no longer distinguish play from work.



Measures of Fire

The Fire is the principle of every life.

Jacob Boehme, *Signatura rerum* xiv.29

In a recent thesis,¹ Dr. William C. Kirk has fulfilled his immediate purpose, which was to discover, as far as that is possible, what was actually said by Heraclitus on Fire. We do not propose to review this brochure, which is fully documented and well constructed. It is rather the restricted purpose of historical scholarship itself that we wish to criticize. We must, indeed, know what has been said; but of what use will such knowledge be to us, unless we consider the meaning of what was said and can apply this meaning to our own experience? Here Dr. Kirk has little more to say than is contained in the significant words, "Heraclitus is one of the Greek philosophers who sought to explain the whole universe in terms of some one basic entity. . . . After his time, to be sure, fire decreased in importance, and men ceased to look for one principle² that would explain all phenomena." This is a confession that men have fallen to the level of that empiricism of which Plato was so contemptuous, and to that of those Greeks whom Plutarch ridiculed because they could no longer distinguish Apollo from Helios, the reality (τὸ ὄν) from the phenomenon, "so much has their sense perception (αἰσθήσις) perverted their power of discrimination (διάνοια)."³ It is, however, only partially true that "the importance of fire has decreased," and only some men have abandoned the search for "one principle."

Dr. Kirk sees that Heraclitus must have had forerunners, but scarcely

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¹ *Fire in the Cosmological Speculations of Heraclitus* (Minneapolis, 1940).

² "One principle" . . . "that One by which, when it is known, all things are known" (BU II.1.5).

³ Plutarch, *Moralia* 393b, 400cd. Cf. Plato, *Lysis* 89d, "The body of Helios is seen by all, his soul by none," and AV x.8.14, "Him (the Sun) all men see, not all know with the mind." "Apollo" is Philo's ὁ νοητὸς ἥλιος. [Note Victor Magnien, *Les Mystères d'Éléusis* (Paris, 1929), p. 143.]