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TOWARDS THE WORLD: EUGEN FINK ON THE COSMOLOGICAL VALUE OF PLAY

Jan Halák

According to Eugen Fink, a thorough elucidation of the meaning of play has the capacity to lead us towards an understanding of the world as a totality. In order to go beyond Plato's understanding of play as an inferior copy of serious action, Fink provides an analysis of the cultic game. This form of playing cannot be said to be the origin of all play, but it enables us to demonstrate how the act of playing transcends circumscribed beings inside the world and provides a relationship with a higher whole, in which the community participating in the play is encompassed. A masked shaman does not represent a particular god, but brings to presence the action of gods upon humans as such. Thus, the cultic game is a symbol of a more important reality, not an inferior representation of an individual reality. This, however, is still not a sufficiently radical interpretation of the ontological dimension of play: the whole is only understood as an action of gods, i.e. mediately. Fink strives to demonstrate on the contrary, how play is a fundamental understanding of the world as a whole without any mediation. Such a relationship is, according to him, essential for humans, and it is already anticipated in several fundamental human actions such as work, combat, governance and love. The reason for this is that these actions all fight against human finitude against the background of the infinitely powerful world. But again, these actions only relate to the world by transforming factual entities that surround us, i.e. again only mediately. For this reason, Fink demonstrates, through another series of structural descriptions, how humans, things, space and time are all profoundly transformed when they enter the playing field. Fink thus presents a complex of reasons on the ground of which we can consider play as the only human activity that teaches us in a direct way how to transcend individual beings and understand their relationship with the world as a totality.

KEYWORDS: Eugen Fink; philosophy of play; cultic gamecosmology; ontology

1. Introduction: The Question of the Value of Play and Its Historical Ontological Underpinning

Our usual strategies of how to find a value in play are paradoxically elaborated from the perspective of 'work' as the norm against which we look for it, asserts German philosopher and phenomenologist Fink (1960, 1974, 2012). Yet if we are only valuing play as workers, not as players, it means that we are unable to value play for what is essential in it ...

For our common-sense understanding, play is a 'virtual' activity which is opposed to 'actual' life. *Actually*, our life consists of work performed upon the material world,

collaboration with others or struggle against them, and the development and application of knowledge. In short, it is a complex of 'serious' actions, i.e. purposefully oriented acts leading to a transformation of the world according to our needs. On the other hand, all we do in play is virtual and purposeless. The 'serious' activities are governed by 'the principles of efficient action', whereas the playing of games is 'inefficient' (Innis 2001, 7; cf. Suits 1977, 2005). Play is thus, from this perspective, automatically endowed with an index of inferiority in regard to life as it is supposed to be 'in itself': life is simply not (mere) play, and if we play, we are, somehow, distant or even absent from what life itself is about. Reality is generally understood as that which can be *acted* upon, and thus the behaviour supposed to be closest to reality is *action*, i.e. the transformation of reality, as opposed to (mere) play, which 'does not produce anything' (e.g. Caillois 2001, 43; Suits 1977, 127). Moreover, from a philosophical point of view, such an understanding presupposes an implicit ontological assessment in this differentiation, for it stands upon a decision on the question: what is the essence of reality as opposed to what is irrelevant and not decisive in this regard? Fink sums up this problem by saying that play is usually understood as possessing a 'lesser degree of power of being [*Seinsmacht*]' (Fink 1960, 229).

There are, of course, many ways in which play is perceived as 'beneficial' for humans, and thus valuable. It would be very hard, though, to find an appreciative interpretation of play that would *not* judge the value of play precisely from the perspective of life as a fundamentally 'serious' matter. In other words, if the value of play is assessed positively in our civilization, the normative measure against which such an appreciation is developed is usually again the serious domain of purposeful action, which transforms the realities around us or penetrates into their intelligible essence by knowledge. Play is, for example, supposed to teach us to respect rules, and thus it enables us to develop rule-governed social interaction, i.e. culture in the proper sense of the word (Huizinga 1955). Play is also said to 'educate' our fundamental psychological energies which, otherwise, could even destroy us: better than becoming an alcoholic, our allegedly fundamental 'need' for vertigo (Caillois' *illinx*), for instance, can be ventilated in a harmless manner by playfully rolling down the hill or, even more wisely, by 'educating' it and becoming, for instance, a fireman or a pilot (Caillois 2001). Furthermore, play allegedly enables us to develop 'cognitive capacities'; it makes 'the brain' more adaptable and thus represents an evolutionary advantage (Pellis, Pellis and Himmler 2014). Bernard Suits' discussion of life and utopia (2005) leads him to a conviction that playing games¹ would be 'precisely what economically and psychologically autonomous individuals would find themselves doing, and perhaps the only things they would find themselves doing' (2005, 140). Yet, if the author defines his 'utopia' as a state in which the only thing we do is to 'voluntar[ily] attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles' (Suits 2005, 55), it is clear that this positive value of play is based, for him, on the understanding of life as an involuntary overcoming of necessary obstacles, i.e. as a complex of efficient instrumental actions related to the (rather inevitable) purpose of self-preservation (cf. e.g. Suits 1977, 122, 125). Thus, here again, the value of play seems to be measured fundamentally against the serious life, for it results from a sort of subtraction of precisely the 'seriousness' of life from life itself.

Thus, indeed, it seems that the reasons for which play is sometimes understood as being of inferior value in relation to the 'serious' life and those which, on other

occasions, serve for its positive appreciation, or even nourish the thoughts of an ‘ideal life’—*are one and the same*.

However, is this perspective on play the only one possible? Is it as self-evident as it seems; is it appropriate? Moreover, is the very ontological assessment opposing ‘serious’ action against ‘inconsequential’ play so self-evident and inviolable? As we have argued elsewhere (Halák 2015), Eugen Fink shows how this kind of devaluation, or more precisely, the evaluation *per negationem* of the ‘serious’, purpose-oriented life, is based on an ontological decision, which chooses to understand the world as an intelligible architecture, or as a victory of a divine ‘craftsmanship’ (or art,) over unintelligible matter () (Fink 1960, 91–93; cf. Plato, *Timaeus*, Cooper and Hutchinson 1997, 1124–1291). Inasmuch as our understanding of what life and world ‘themselves’ are continues to be derived from the norm according to which ‘to be’ equals to allow to be efficiently acted upon according to a rational and/or purposeful principle, we still share Plato’s ‘craftsman’ perspective and his ‘metaphysical’ ontology, which reconstructs reality itself according to the model of particular real objects and their relationships (e.g. ‘material’, ‘product’, ‘plan’, ‘craftsman’). Such a ‘world-historical decision’ is, however, open to revision (Fink 1960, 92; cf. Spariosu 1989, 129). More importantly, the goal of Fink’s philosophy of play is to develop such a turn in perspective *based on a thorough analysis of the phenomenon of play* which, in his opinion, not only does not fit into this metaphysical model, but opens a way in which to develop a legitimate alternative to it.

Plato interprets play from a ‘craftsman’ perspective, i.e. as an activity of imitation taking place between two circumscribed realities, a model and its copy. For him, play is thus a depiction or representation, i.e. a backward-oriented reference to a model. What is more, he interprets this relationship between the model and its copy as a *mirroring*, i.e. as a parallel existence of the model and its enfeebled reflection. As such a reflection, play is for him a craftsman’s product *without actual existence*, therefore an *inferior* product of a purpose-related action. In Fink’s opinion, however, Plato’s interpretation of play is biased and prevents us from acceding to the ‘full and authentic’ sense of play (Fink 1960, 102). By considering play only from the perspective of production, *Plato underscores one of the traits of play which is not essential*, and suppresses the fundamental ones: even though there is usually a mimetical aspect to play, play is not *identical* to the act of copying, and the essence of what is taking place in play is thus not mimetical.

Play cannot be assessed from the craftsman perspective of ‘serious’ action. For the elements of play can be seen as a non-actual copy of an original only from an external, disenchanted perspective, whereas from the perspective of play itself, the meaning of play is inseparable from the actual elements which carry it out. For this reason, we cannot isolate the ‘non-actual’ dimension of play (i.e. the fact that it is related to something other than what it is itself, that it is partly imaginary) and judge its total value only inasmuch it is somehow opposed to the dimension of real things and events. Such an approach would make us pass over the actual problem, which is precisely to understand how the irreal dimension is connected to the real one and how they interpenetrate. In sum, the craftsman perspective of an ‘instrumental’ action that rejects the imaginary dimension of play as something non-actual, irreal, necessarily loses the value of play as a whole, in which the real and the irreal interpenetrate. Inversely, *if we are to assess the ontological value of play appropriately, we have to stop measuring the value of*

play from the perspective of the reality of instrumental action, for by simply measuring play as a deficient version of an effective production, we disregard its essence. (For Fink's discussion with Plato, see Fink 1960, 66–124; see also 2012, 20.)

Thus, if we suspend the not-so-self-evident Platonic interpretation which inevitably leads to a devaluation of play, the fundamental problem is, now, *how the imaginary dimension enters the world of everyday realities and how it is able to transform it in a way that differs from any modification as understood from the craftsman perspective of a purposeful production*. From the point of view that we have just outlined, the profound transformation of the world via play is far from being understood, and the question of how to assess its proper value is still open. In the following section, I would, therefore, like to follow and present what Eugen Fink's philosophy of play offers in regard to this as-yet-unexplored possibility to reconsider the value of play in the context of our understanding of reality.

2. The Cultic Game: Fink's Critique of the Onto-theological Understanding of Play

On the basis of his rigorous critical analysis of the Platonic, metaphysical interpretation of play, Fink points to the fact that the 'non-actuality' of play does not mean 'nothing', a non-being, but 'something enigmatic', as he writes, which is neither a being like ordinary 'things', nor as insignificant as a mere hallucination or subjective fiction. As adults living in the modern world of Western traditional thinking, we have very often lost the relationship with what play points to through its imaginary, enigmatic dimension. The things that surround us have sunken into an everyday familiarity, they have no depth, they are 'worn out' and we do not see any enigmas in them anymore.

There is, however, an ancient human praxis dedicated to bringing such enigma back into things. This kind of renewal is possible only mediately, through the elevation of some 'things' to a level where they symbolize the totality of reality. *The cult* attempts to bring back into things the presence of the totality on the basis of a *gesture of delimitation*, through which the sphere of the ordinary is separated from what is sacred. Cult, asserts Fink, is probably the most original form of human play, in which the moment of 'irreality', essential for all play, has become the medium of elevation *above* all those ordinary, now 'merely' real, things. Fink concedes that not all play is derived from cult and that not all cult is play, but for him, the analysis of cult makes it possible to overcome the underrating of the 'irreal' dimension of play by understanding it, contrarily to the metaphysical Platonic interpretation, as a reference to a *higher* being than that of everyday things: as 'super-real' or divine.

Let us now examine how this pre-metaphysical ontological understanding is deployed in the cultic game (for Fink's discussion of this topic, see Fink 1960, 125–206).

The archaic man does not feel 'at home' in the world. All that he sees and touches can suddenly and unexpectedly be overshadowed by invisible forces: to him, all the familiar things can all of a sudden become frightening. He does not treat this fact in ontological terms, but rather sees it as the action of daemons, incessantly following the slightest of his steps. The archaic man might later also distinguish between the bad daemons and the good ones (which are, however, still dangerous, because powerful). Since an alliance with the good daemons could be advantageous in the struggle

against the bad ones, the archaic man has to try to 'influence' the former by leading a good life—and, even more importantly, by performing sacrifices, prayers and other ritual gestures.

Unlike ordinary human actions, the cultic action has a specific structure of 'assimilation'. The ritual behaviour of the shaman is an act of 'bringing into presence': it *stands for and reflects* the events taking place on the level of the totality. The great events that rule over everything particular are now brought into the small sphere of his clan companions. The cultic acts cannot be said to be an *imitation*, for the totality is not given as an original; the magical behaviour anticipates and reflects—but *as a symbol represents a whole*, not as an imitation repeats its model. For the archaic man, the cult is rather a complex of actions only through which the totality acquires shape and becomes visible.

Fink explains this structure in more detail with the phenomenon of the shaman's mask. The act of taking on a mask is not an attempt to mislead someone, since everybody knows who is under the mask. Here again, to say that men 'mimic' the god (cf. Caillois 2001, 88–89) would be to miss the action of play and to misunderstand its mode of existence, which is the *intertwining* of the unreal and the real dimension, not an unreal copying of the real. The mask does not 'represent' the daemon as his imitation, for the daemons themselves, disguised in things, are invisible, and therefore nobody knows what they really look like and cannot depict them. The primitive man does not see the mask and the daemon as two distinct objects that can enter into a relation of a copy and a model. It is precisely the daemons' *ambiguous intertwining with things*, their hiding in things and our incapacity to face them directly, that gives them such power as they have. If this were not the case, we could fight them or overcome their power through work; but if they were to be affected by work, it would mean that their power had already disappeared. As the still-powerful daemons disguise themselves in things, the weak humans disguise themselves by taking on a mask in a risky attempt to become themselves ambiguous, daemon-like. Nobody is able to isolate daemons from the things in which they hide, so the essence of the shaman's action—the only human daring to face their powers—consists in *taking over* the daemons' mode of being—and, *as a person-hidden-in-mask, become himself daemons-hidden-in-things*. *The members of the tribe see in their masked shaman neither the daemon itself, nor the shaman: what they encounter in this way is precisely 'demoniac-ambiguity-as-such', the descent of a supernatural all-embracing power to the level of ordinary, natural things.*

The shaman's mask is not magic, in the way that a stone is heavy: it is not an 'instrument'; it does not produce any 'work'. It is not 'efficient' and cannot be manipulated in order to cause a specific effect on specific things and persons. Such action is only possible between natural objects, whereas the relationship between the mask, its holder, and the daemon is not that of such an 'inner-worldly', 'ontic' relationship. In this regard, Caillois observes (2001, 130) the mask becomes a mere instrument in the moment when the *mimicry* is dissociated from the *illinx*, i.e. when the participants no more feel their vertiginous abandonment to the higher powers brought into the mask via the ritual action. In that moment, however, we are precisely outside the regime of playing. The shaman's playful act in the mask transports him to a different level of reality, which is no more that of ordinary things inside the world—it is an act of sorcery and magic, through which he places himself in the dangerous zone where he is somehow participating in the higher mode of being of the daemons.

The mask is therefore not something 'with' which the shaman plays, it is not a 'resource', the effects of which could be redirected from the inside of the world to the world as such; it is rather that 'in' which he plays, and 'through' which the play is inaugurated: it is a spell-thing (*Zauber-Ding*, Fink 1960, 166), the magic power itself, a segment of reality where all the critical aspects of the tribe's intersubjective environment become concentrated, a symbol of the totality of the world in which the tribe is living. The understanding of the fact that 'there is someone masked' thus coincides with the fundamental act of bringing in a symbol of a more important reality. Through an act of assimilation, the masked shaman himself becomes a palpable specimen of a more powerful reality, a small window in which the tribe's whole existential situation is now reflected and thus becomes visible. The masked shaman is not an ontic *substitute* for the higher powers, not a 'sign' for them: within his limited human powers, he becomes *identical* with these higher powers, in terms of his mode of being.

Between the part and the whole, between the gestures of the masked shaman on the one hand and the universe on the other, there is, therefore, an assimilative harmony—one dimension is reflected in the other. Ultimately, the foundation for the practical significance of magical actions can be laid down only based on such a homology: the shaman knows the powerful gestures through which he can follow the daemonic powers and, above all, move them in the necessary direction. Understandably, it is only if the totality is reflected in a finite part, that an action on the level of this finite part can transform events on the level of the totality. If confirmed through appropriate ritual actions, the correlation between the part and the whole connects archaic man's everyday life with the superhuman dimension.

Accordingly, the cultic game was not marginal in the life of archaic man. It was not a *mere* play, but rather a fundamental act through which humans understood and interpreted themselves. As practised in cult, play is thus not a non-serious imitation of everyday serious actions, but quite on the contrary, the most serious of all possible actions. Far from any theoretical and conceptual elaboration, the performance of magical gestures *practically* secured the social group in regard to the invisible powers bringing down misfortune or granting their blessing, thus governing the universe. *The non-actual character of the magical cultic representation is the site of a breakthrough of a more truthful, more actual reality: the reality of the all-powerful forces* (Fink 1960, 174). Thus unlike in the metaphysical Platonic tradition where the 'irreal' is ontologically interpreted as *less* than real, *in the cult, the imaginary 'irreal' dimension* (Unwirkliche), *becomes the place of the 'super-real'* (Überwirkliche) (ibid.).

According to Fink, this understanding furthermore opens the way to reality 'in the proper sense' (Fink 1960, 175). For at this point, the author presents a fundamental objection: the world, he writes, 'is never *something* real [*ein Wirkliches*], it is not *the highest* of all realities in terms of the powerfulness of its being—it is rather the all-embracing *reality* [*Wirklichkeit*], *the tissue* of all realities' (ibid.). Cultic understanding of play might thus partially reveal the super-real powers in their play-like character, but *it veils them at the same time* as it interprets it only as a play of daemons and gods. The relationship between the limited domain of cultic representation and the quasi-unlimited being of gods is still, for Fink, a relationship between two beings, an ontic relationship *inside* the world. The personal being of gods is necessarily limited, as is all personal being, for it has to distinguish itself from all that it is not: gods do not blend with the

totality of being, they are still *individual* beings—they are, therefore, not the world itself, but only inside it.

Fink pursues his argumentation by pointing out that the reign of gods itself, their organizing and ruling activity, is not only presented *on the basis of play* (cultic game), but most of the time, it is also *interpreted as* a play of gods (Fink 1960, 175). The understanding of the relationship of gods to the world can vary—it can be conceived as work or as governance, but their activity never has the nature of human action, for it is purposeless and without restrictions: it is play. Gods *never need* to have much regards for us, they *can whenever they wish* throw us into suffering: they have exactly the same relationship towards us as a player to his plaything, which is not a particularly considerate one. What is more, in some traditions gods themselves are described as absorbed by the playful attitude, fascinated and caught in their toils, thus not entirely mastering themselves. Which one of the two relationships to the plaything do we have to apply to the play of the gods, the distanced or the fascinated? Such ambiguity is, according to Fink, precisely the reason why the play of the gods points towards a ‘more original’ play, in which the gods themselves are playthings (Fink 1960, 180).

We have seen how the cultic game brings to light a fundamental piece of knowledge about the world: all worldly events are interconnected and interdependent, every singular being finds itself founded by others in some regard; but the universal nexus of all events as such *does not* have any foundation, is not based on a particular reality. In other words, the totality ‘reigning’ upon particular beings is a purposeless play. *The play of gods points to a possibly more original mode of play, which is no more anthropomorphic and transcends all events inside the world.* The truth of gods’ play is the play of the world (Fink 1960, 183), for it points to the ultimate framing of gods’ play—pure play without a player, on the level of the cosmos. Gods are still *in the world*, they are encompassed by a reality even more powerful, higher than themselves, for it is *in it* that they play.

Fink summarizes his analysis of the cultic understanding of play by observing that the interpretation of play as the play of the gods *did not* reveal the true ontological nature of play: play is played on a higher level than that on which we find the gods themselves. The most original mode of play is thus, according to Fink, revealed not by the cultic understanding, but rather by what we can anticipate based on the B52 Heraclitus’ fragment, which is interpreted by the author earlier in his book: *ἡ ζωὴ παιγνίσκος*; ‘Lifetime is a child at play, moving pieces in a game. Kingship belongs to the child.’ (we use Charles H. Kahn’s translation, which seems to be closest to Fink’s understanding; cf. Fink 1960, 192–193; 2012, 24) ‘Lifetime’, explains Fink, means originally the human course of life; the fragment thus speaks, according to him, about the cosmos as a beautiful articulation of things and events which embraces them all and gives them a unified general character. Throughout the course of its transformations, the cosmos gathers particular beings into a structured unity—exactly in the way in which play gathers the elements which enter in it into a unified whole.

3. Fink’s Positive Thesis: The Exceptional Status of Play as a Relationship with the Totality

Apart from play, there are several ‘fundamental existential phenomena’ (Fink 1960, 228; 2012, 8–9) or dimensions of human existence, in which the human

understanding of the world as a totality plays a role. Fink states repeatedly that it is also in labour, combat and love that we encounter ‘references’ to the world as a totality (cf. in particular Fink 1960, 128–130, 149, 164, 228). Because humans know about their mortality and in general their finite nature, they always somehow understand the all-powerful world that embraces them as a power endangering their own finite existence. It is only because of this relationship that humans *are able to fight against* their feeble condition through work, their own political organization and the renewing of their genus (Fink 1960, 149). Animals, on the other hand, do not situate themselves in regard to the world as such and its disturbing powers, they only dwell *inside* the world. Ignorant of their mortality and thus of their own existence, they *cannot* work, rule, love—nor play as humans do, at least as Fink understands it (cf. Fink 2012, 12). As for the gods, they understand the world, but since everything they do is eternal, they *do not need* to work, love, nor govern themselves—they only play, with humans as their playthings (Fink 1960, 149).

From this point of view, when considering human nature, play has *no less important* a status than labour, combat and love. Nevertheless, there is also a reason for which play has to obtain an exceptional position, making it even *more important* than the other phenomena mentioned. For while realizing the other activities that Fink enumerates, humans only seem to have relationship with beings, *Seienden*, i.e. merely with individualized, circumscribed, inner-worldly realities (Fink 1960, 228). In combat, we struggle with a particular enemy; in labour, we strive to subjugate a particular natural reality; in love, we long for a fusion with a particular erotic partner: the objects of these actions possess the same type of existence as ourselves—they are individualized realities. These actions are carried out in a delimited domain of things inside the world and do not need to transcend it.

Fink asserts, on the contrary, that in play we *transcend* every relationship with circumscribed realities, and encounter a relationship with the world as such, which is not a ‘big’ thing, but a totality transcending all particular limits by which things always need to be circumscribed. Beyond the reasons clarified when criticizing the metaphysical and cultic understanding of play, Fink provides a complex of arguments for his position, which are linked to the transformation undergone on the level of the persons, objects and space-time involved in play. These traits can be summarized as follows.

Humans are inner-worldly realities, who are continuously fixed in their existence by their own self-determining actions. As humans, we are the products of our decisions and we can never actually abandon this ‘shape’ that we continue to create by choosing our ways of living, or by more or less tacitly accepting them. Yet, in play, we can transcend the determined boundaries of our being; we can free ourselves from the grip of our fate which dominates us as inner-worldly realities. When playing,

we feel life’s open, unlimited character, our swaying in pure possibilities, we feel what we have lost by the acts of our decisions, we feel the play-like character in the very roots of our freedom and the irresponsibility in the very roots of responsibility. (Fink 1960, 232)

This is, for Fink, the decisive moment: it is precisely thanks to this act of transcendence in regard to our original condition that we encounter the ‘depth of world’s being in us’, that we touch the ‘playful foundation that resides in the being of all existing things’

(ibid.). For, as we have seen, the world in Fink's opinion is a purposeless totality which embraces all the uninterrupted sequences of purposeful, causally linked, founded events and processes (Fink 1960, 238). The world as a totality is ungrounded, without reason or purpose, beyond all moral judgments about good and evil, without value and sense, without plan and without goal (ibid.). The act of play is precisely the moment when we pass from a position of an inner-worldly factual entity, limited by all other entities and linked to them by causal, grounded and purpose-related relationships, to a status of a genuine *inhabitant* of the cosmos who somewhat participates in its mode of being, which is absolutely ungrounded and free from all conditionality.

Moreover, a similar assessment needs to be provided not only on the level of the person playing, but also on the level of the object played with. In play, we only take possession of such and such a particular reality in order to transform it into a 'play-thing', i.e. to transport it to another dimension of being, in which the real things are superimposed with an unreal, imaginary dimension of meaning. Without doubt, every play is co-constituted by a range of actual determinants, not only in the form of the objects one plays with, but also by many others such as beneficial circumstances, playful opportunities and interesting outcomes. But as far as there is a play, as far as we succeed to play amidst all of these materials, they all lose their meaning-determining power and have their meaning dictated by a logic which is only inherent in play, i.e. to a whole which transcends them. It is finally for this reason that the real elements which are taken over and integrated into play can always be substituted by different ones. This absolute meaning-giving character of play in regard to whatever is able to enter in it, can be again more precisely described as the absence, in play, of a cause, of a goal, of any moral judgement, for the constraints imposed by play on the real elements entering it go beyond any distinctions of good and evil and are absolutely ungrounded.

A similar process of extrication from the nexus of mutually conditioned inner-worldly realities can finally be observed also on the level of space and time. The virtual space and time of play 'uses' real space and time, and is based upon it, but the two never simply lay one beside the other. The transition to the inner field of play presupposes a crossing into a clearly separated domain, which thus necessarily breaks the usual spatiotemporal continuum. It is, finally, only in this way that we can 'get lost' in play and 'forget' that real time is passing. So, in general, play is 'set apart' from all other human actions and inner-worldly realities and thus constitutes an entirely 'self-sufficient', separate domain, which cannot be reduced to, or deduced from, any set of circumscribed realities. For it is precisely these realities that the play uses for its own 'goals' which are not dependent on any external conditionality. In other words, by subjugating them to its rules, play imposes on the circumscribed realities of the everyday life *its own* constraints, *its own* justice and injustice—and leaves all the usual ones out.

Play, asserts Fink, has therefore the distinctive feature among other human activities that it *necessarily* introduces the human to a relationship with something other than delimited things—beings (*Seienden*). In play, all actions and objects acted upon are *necessarily* permeated by the totality of the play-world, for as soon as its influence ceases to 'cast its spell' upon them, the war-horse or the battleship with which the child plays is again a mere piece of wood, the hero is again only an actor–employee of the local theatre, the game-player's refined skills lose their crucial relevance and he/she becomes once again a quite ordinary person. In order to be able to play, one needs to transcend the realities as they are (*Seienden*) towards a meaningful whole which is not reducible to

them, yet which is responsible for what they ultimately are. Once this relationship between the particular and the total is made explicit, it has the effect of profoundly transforming ourselves, the relationship we have with things, and the things themselves. Playing is, therefore, an example of a relationship with realities which is not anymore merely 'ontic', related to *Seinenden*, for inasmuch as the particular beings need to be kept in touch with the play-world as a totality, play has the force to remind us *in general* of the totality as such to which we belong, and helps to prevent us forgetting it.

The act of play thus powerfully transforms the realities which surround us in the everyday mode, for it is an action of a radical self-sufficient freedom which gives meaning and even (quasi)existence. *This absoluteness of play in regard to what enters into its domain is again precisely that which is, for Fink, so reminiscent of the relationship of the world in regard to the beings it contains: this is where lies the cosmological importance of play.* In play as well as in the world, we encounter, as Fink puts it, a 'coming-to-be and passing away, structuring and destroying, without any moral additive' (Fink 1960, 238). The considerable importance Fink attributes to play is linked precisely to the fact that it is a behaviour that enables us to re-experience the creation and perpetual recreation of the world, that it reminds us of the world itself as a 'play without a player', as the ultimate dimension of our existence and of the reality of all things (Fink 1960, 230, cf. 240–242).

Nevertheless, this assimilation to the mode of being of the world itself cannot be realized fully: man is a limited entity, whereas the world is all-embracing and limitless. This is, therefore, the point at which it becomes evident that the crucial condition of an authentic human relationship to the world as a totality is precisely *the intertwining between the dimensions of the 'actual' and the 'non-actual' which we have seen from the beginning as characteristic for play.* In play, we are indeed freed from the actual form of our existence, and from our bound freedom which is responsible for it—yet it is only in the mode of 'non-actuality', i.e. in an imaginary way. It is, therefore, only thanks to the ambiguous character of play, with its intertwining of reality and irreality, that the world can 'shine upon' the human as on a particular, delimited segment of the world itself. It is because, in play, we have the opportunity to act non-actually as the world itself, i.e. as if we were 'irresponsible', 'all-powerful', 'in all possibilities at once' (Fink 1960, 232), and that we can somehow adopt and understand the mode of being of the world as such. So for Fink, *the value of the virtual character of play needs to be assessed not based on a confrontation with things and worldly events which would force us to consider it as more or less than them (a copy of an actual reality or epiphany of gods)—but from the human relatedness to the world as a totality.* In this way, Fink's interpretation of play opens the way to grasping its positive value, inasmuch as it is an ontologically, or even cosmologically instructive, phenomenon. Play reminds us how to transcend mere things towards that which gives being to things.

In other words, playing embraces a practical ontology. *By treating beings as 'play-things' and ourselves as 'players', by adopting the prodigal, careless and irresponsible attitude of playing, we set apart a domain of a free and ungrounded emerging and vanishing of individual entities, which is, according to Fink, how we truly 'lean out' to the openness of the world, which is itself characterized precisely by an unlimited, unfounded and careless nature, and which serves as the all-encompassing ground for all individual realities.*

Fink finally underlines that the relationship to the world as a totality is not 'caused' by play, but that, on the contrary, play is a *testimony* of our ontological relationship with

the world. Fink thus closes his cosmological meditation on play with a strong anthropologic as well as ontological statement: *it is because humans are open to the world as a limitless totality, because they understand the purposeless reality as such, as opposed to only dealing with conditioned particular realities, that they are also players* (Fink 1960, 240). *Inversely, by playing, we get back to this foundation of our existence as humans, which is fundamentally obscured if we understand ourselves exclusively as workers.*

4. Conclusion: Play as a Lesson in Cosmological Ontology

The purpose of this article was to present Fink's fundamental cosmological thesis: play is a delimited fragment of the world, in which the dynamic exchange between the world as a totality and particular things inside the world is repeated 'writ small' in the mode of an imaginary paraphrase. That is, play is a symbol of the world, it has in itself a cosmological value.

From an ontological perspective, Fink's analysis of play provides a basis for considering the ontological difference between the totality of being (*Sein*) and particular beings (*Seienden*), without reducing it to a relationship between beings. According to Fink, play teaches us how to overcome the mistake, incessantly perpetuated in Western philosophy at least since Plato, of placing this difference somewhere into the world, thus forgetting that being as such—or, more concretely, the world—is not an object such as those we encounter in everyday life.

We have also seen how Fink explains more precisely that there are two possibilities how to lose this ontological understanding, which is, according to him, inherent to play. The first danger comes from metaphysics, which interprets play as a non-actual imitation of an actual delimited being. The second danger is to understand play as a representation of a super-real being, as we can see it in the cult, which makes it a place of the epiphany of gods. Play, asserts Fink, on the contrary, does not represent any *being*, be it finite or supernatural. Both of these interpretations would incorrectly *reduce* the ontological difference between reality as such and realities, to a difference between realities. Play is to the imaginary realities it absorbs as the world is to the actual realities it contains: it is the very process of establishing the meaning and existence of things, which transcend them all and can never be understood as founded in them. Based on this relatedness between the total and the particular, human play establishes a non-actual, virtual existence of particular realities—whereas the play of the world establishes their real, actual existence.

Fink's philosophy of play thus invites us to reverse the usual perspective, according to which reality is the product of a cosmological craftsman's operation, and the activity closest to it is purposeful efficient action. In play, we are, therefore, not distant from reality, playing is not 'less real', for reality itself exhibits fundamental traits which are then rediscovered in play. Accordingly, the value of play ought not be judged merely by the norm of 'serious action', but on the basis of its homology with the structure which the world itself has in regard to the particular beings it contains. A concrete philosophy of play would be based on such a radically different evaluation, and would concentrate on a detailed description of the transformation of our understanding, via play, from that of a craftsman to that of an 'inhabitant of the cosmos'. Such an account remains to be written. Eugen Fink has succeeded, in my judgement, in demonstrating that it is possible, or even needed.

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NOTE

1. For the purpose of this article, we will not distinguish between ‘play’ and ‘game’, since Fink, our main source here, never comments on the possibility of such distinction. The German word *das Spiel* comprises both of these meanings (e.g. *Brettspiel*, a board game; *Kinderspiel*, child play; *Puppenspiel*, puppet play) and author’s examples of ‘das Spiel’ accordingly include wide range of plays and games, such as board games (e.g. as mentioned in Heraclitus’ fragment B52), sport, cultic game, theatre or child play.

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