

# Play as an Autotelic Activity

## A Defense

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**Abstract:** In his paper ‘Words on Play’, Bernard Suits famously defines play as an autotelic activity. Some philosophers like Stephen E. Schmid argue against Suits’s position by pointing out that the concept of autotelicity in Suits’s work is too unclear to serve as a defining feature for play. Due to that fact, Schmid dismisses autotelicity in favor of a definition of play in terms of the player’s engagement in an activity for intrinsic reasons. The purpose of this paper is to defend Suits’s claim by clarifying the concept of autotelicity in the context of play and by arguing against some typical misconceptions about autotelicity in Schmid’s work and in the work of others. First, I define autotelic activities as activities that are engaged in for their own sake. Then, I argue that the engagement in an activity for its own sake is neither in conflict with the activity’s potential internal instrumental structure nor with the existence of certain intrinsic reasons (such as pleasure).

**Keyword:** Autotelicity, play, games, instrumentality, intrinsic reasons.

## 1 Introduction

In his paper ‘Words on Play’, Bernard Suits defines *play*<sup>1</sup> as an autotelic activity that involves a temporary reallocation of resources primarily committed to instrumental purposes (Suits 1977, 124).<sup>2</sup> Both the assumption that play involves such a reallocation and that it is an autotelic activity has since been criticized. Richard Royce, for instance, pointed out difficulties in the idea that play requires such a reallocation (Royce 2011). Stephen E. Schmid pointed out that the concept of autotelicity – as it is currently employed in the literature – is too unclear to serve as a defining feature of play (Schmid 2009). Usually, autotelic activities are defined as activities that are engaged in for their own sake, that is, as ends in themselves.<sup>3</sup> Sometimes, however, they are defined as activities engaged in for intrinsic reasons (such as fun, pleasure, or challenge) or as activities that are intrinsically valued. Some philosophers, including Suits, even define autotelicity in all of the above ways. Schmid later dismisses the concept of autotelicity and opts for a definition of play in terms of the player’s engagement in an activity for intrinsic reasons (idem., 2011).

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<sup>1</sup> As Suits remarks, the word ‘play’ is ambiguous (Suits 1977, 120). Sometimes, it is simply used as a transitive verb to denote the (potentially not autotelic) performance of an instrument, such as ‘play the guitar’, or the (potentially not autotelic) engagement in a game in general, such as ‘play football’. Other times, it is used metaphorically as in ‘playing with someone’s feelings’. What I am exclusively interested in here is *playful* activity – the kind of activity that can be contrasted with work and that we could describe by using the word ‘play’ intransitively and by adding an emphasizing ‘just’, as Feezell does (Feezell 2010, 151): “He is *just* playing.” Henceforth, when I speak of ‘play’, I mean exactly that kind of activity.

<sup>2</sup> The claim that play is an autotelic activity in the sense of an activity done for its own sake can already be found in the canonical work on play ‘Homo Ludens’ by Johan Huizinga from 1938: “[P]lay is a voluntary activity or occupation [...] having its aim in itself.” (Huizinga 1955, 26)

<sup>3</sup> I will use the phrases ‘for its/their own sake’ and ‘as an end-in-itself’ or ‘as ends-in-themselves’ interchangeably.

Recently, Francisco Javier Lopez Frías (2016, 2020) tried to revive the idea of play as an autotelic activity. However, Schmid is right that there is still no consistent conception of autotelicity in the context of play. Specifically, it is unclear how one can engage in an activity *both* for its own sake and for ‘further’ intrinsic reasons – as it often seems to be the case (Schmid 2011, 155; also see Royce 2011, 99-100). Lopez Frías’s attempts, at least, are insufficient to solve this problem.

The purpose of this paper is modest. I want to clarify the concept of autotelicity and defend the notion of play as an autotelic activity against its critics. Whether play also necessarily involves reallocation, as Suits argues in his early paper, is not my concern. I do not try to provide a *full* definition of play to distinguish it from other autotelic activities.

In section 2, I opt for the definition of autotelic activity as an activity that an agent engages in for its own sake. In section 3, I show what it means for an activity to be engaged in for its own sake and argue that an activity’s autotelic nature is not in conflict with its internal instrumental structure. In section 4, I argue that the engagement in an autotelic activity is also not necessarily in conflict with the existence of intrinsic reasons. This argumentative approach is largely inspired by the action-philosophical work of Candace Vogler (2008). Focusing on pleasure, I show that the relation between the agent’s engagement in an activity and the pleasure she acts *from*, as Vogler puts it, is not an instrumental but itself an intrinsic relation. Therefore, it is an activity that can be engaged in *both* from pleasure and for its own sake.

## **2 Schmid and three accounts of autotelicity**

According to Schmid, philosophers of play and sport often provide a variety of conceptually distinct accounts of autotelicity. This fact has led him to the conclusion that the

“conception of play as autotelic activity is less than clear” (Schmid 2009, 239). In a later paper, he even argues that the conception of autotelicity should be rejected in favor of an account of play as something that is engaged in for *intrinsic reasons* – reasons that satisfy the agent’s basic human needs for satisfaction, well-being, and autonomy (ibid., 244; 2011, 151, 159).

I agree with the assessment that accounts of play as autotelic activity differ from each other in important ways. Sometimes, autotelic activity is described as an activity performed for *intrinsic reasons* (Meier 1988, 25; Suits 1977, 128-129). Sometimes, it is described as an activity *valued for itself* or as something that is *intrinsically valued* (Suits 1988, 8; 2005, 32; Feezell 2004, 17). Most of the times, however, it is described as an activity that is an *end-in-itself* (Suits 1977, 117; Kolnai 1966, 113; Lopez Frías 2020, 9, Feezell 2010, 152).

I opt for the third account. This should not be surprising. The word ‘autotelic’ means nothing but ‘self-end’ or ‘being-its-own-end’. Schmid, however, rejects the third account right away. In his earlier paper, he argues that this account, properly thought through, reduces to the account of autotelic activity as an activity performed for intrinsic reasons – psychological states such as fun, joy, or pleasure. This is so because, as he argues, being-an-end-in-itself requires that the activity has some ‘inherent/intrinsic property’ that is *independent* of the player’s intentions, attitudes, and reasons and that is the *actual* goal aimed at: “[I]f the activity is an end in itself, then that activity has the requisite property for it to be an end in itself [...]”. (Schmid 2009, 242) However, “it is not so clear what aspect or property of the action is supposed to be an end in itself.” (Ibid., 243) So, activities *themselves* do not seem to have such properties: “[T]here is reason to think that [...] there is no intrinsic property of an action or activity which makes the action or activity an end in

itself.” (Ibid., 242) This motivates Schmid to shift his focus from the activity to the agent’s individual intentions, attitudes, and, most importantly, to her *reasons* for engaging in an activity: “[W]hat one might really mean by saying autotelic play is an activity that is an end in itself is that it is an activity that is either intrinsically valuable or pursued for intrinsic reasons.” (Ibid.) And after rejecting the account of autotelic activity as intrinsically valued activity, he concludes: “[T]here are good reasons for taking autotelic play as intentional action for intrinsic reasons.” (Ibid., 247)

I think that Schmid’s criticism rests on two confusions. The purpose of this section is to expose these confusions to support the position that autotelic activities are indeed best understood as activities that are ends-in-themselves.

First, it is a confusion to assume that the *concept* of being-an-end-in-itself implies that the respective activity has some inherent/intrinsic properties that are ‘actually’ the agent’s ends. This is not what ‘being-an-end-in-itself’ *means*. ‘Being-an-end-in-itself’ describes nothing but a certain kind of telic role an activity plays *for* an agent. It says precisely that an activity is not done for the sake of *something else* – let it be a further activity or a property of it – but for its own sake. It means that the agent’s telic reasoning ‘comes to rest’ when arriving at that activity. When asked *why* she engages in a certain activity for its own sake, the answer will simply be: “I just want/like to do *it*.” In section 3, I will further specify what such an engagement actually amounts to.

It might be the case that the respective activity has a property such as *being fun*, *being pleasant*, or *being challenging* which can also be referred to by the agent when asked such a question. But that *need not* be the case. It is not part of the *concept* of being-an-end-in-

itself that there must be such a property.<sup>4</sup> And even if the respective activity is pleasant, challenging, or fun, its telic status of being-an-end-in-itself is not necessarily in conflict with that fact. As I will show in section 4, given that the activity is engaged in autotelically, it is still the activity *itself* that is the agent's end and *not* that property.

Secondly, Schmid draws a sharp distinction between the activity itself and the agent's attitudes and intentions with which she engages in it. This leads him to the conclusion that we should not focus on the activity but rather look 'into the agent's head' when trying to find out what the agent really aims at. But this distinction is misleading. Activities are metaphysically (as Schmid would say) either means to something else or ends-in-themselves precisely *in virtue of* the agent's attitudes and intentions.

It is true that activities *qua type* can neither be ends-in-themselves nor means to something else. Whether throwing a baseball is done for its own sake or as a means to another end depends, as Schmid correctly states, on the context and the agent's intentions (ibid., 242; 2011, 151). However, a *particular* activity, such as *my* throwing the baseball on September 20<sup>th</sup> in my mother's garden, is indeed (metaphysically) either an end-in-itself or a means to something else. *Particular* activities are not distinct from the agent's individual engagement in them with a certain intention. Such a particular activity is *nothing but* the agent's engagement in it. Accordingly, the agent's intention to  $\phi$  for its own sake or for the

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<sup>4</sup> In the appendix to 'Words on Play', Suits tells the story of Gluteus Maximus who is contemplating God, whilst the barbarians are attacking Rome. When Sergeant Salvatorius asks him several questions regarding his motivation for contemplating, he rejects all of them. There is simply no further end or inherent property or intrinsic reason to which the engagement in such an activity is a means. Gluteus's contemplating the gods is simply "good in itself" (Suits 1977, 129-133).

sake of  $\psi$ -ing makes it the case that her activity *is* an activity of  $\phi$ -ing for its own sake or for the sake of  $\psi$ -ing, respectively.

There is, however, a difficulty when one tries to determine the telic status of *joint events* such as *games*. A game is a joint event in which usually several players engage. The rules of such a game determine which move is allowed and therefore counts as a move within the game. But they do not prescribe that a player *must* engage in it for its own sake. Suits calls the position that participating in a game only counts as the participation *in a game* if the player engages in it for its own sake ‘radical autotelism’ and rejects it (Suits 2005, 133). Since, for Suits, play requires autotelicity as a necessary condition, he distinguishes play from games *as such*: “I have never – anywhere – made, or even, entertained the ridiculous assertion that some games or sports as such are play or that some as such are not.” (Idem. 2004, 9-10). I agree with this rejection. One player can participate in a game for its own sake (and thereby be playing) whilst another can participate in the same game for the sake of earning money, becoming famous (and thereby be working), or fighting for their life, etc. Due to this fact, Royce draws the conclusion that activities *as such* can neither be ends-in-themselves nor means to further ends. He says:

An activity can be regarded as autotelic by someone when she sees it as an end in itself, but someone else might regard it differently. Hence, when several people are engaged in the same activity, such as a game, their attitude towards it can vary. We cannot therefore classify the activity itself as either autotelic or otherwise [...]. (Royce 2011, 101)

I think that the difficulty here is terminological. We can call joint events like games ‘activities’ and say that they can neither be ends-in-themselves nor means to something else. However, we can also call the *individual engagement* – the individual series of actions

(moves) of a particular player – in a particular game ‘that player’s (individual) activity’. An activity in this sense can indeed be an end-in-itself if the player engages in it (or performs it) for its own sake. Henceforth, whenever I speak of ‘activity’, I mean exactly that.<sup>5</sup>

Defining ‘activity’ in this way also helps to support the main thesis of this paper, namely that *play* is an autotelic activity. What we mean by ‘play’ in this context is clearly not a game or some other kind of joint event but rather the player’s individual performance either alone or as the participant in a game. What we mean is the player’s individual *playing*.

If all of this is true, Schmid’s attack against the definition of an autotelic activity as an activity that is an end-in-itself loses its bite. It is not part of the concept of being-an-end-in-itself that the respective activity must have some inherent property that is *actually* the end aimed at. Furthermore, since activities – understood in a certain way – are not distinct from the agent’s engagement in them with some intention, there is no need to shift the focus to the agent’s ‘inner life’. Activities *are* ends-in-themselves or means to further ends precisely *because* the agent engages in them as ends-in-themselves or as means to further ends, respectively.

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<sup>5</sup> Angela Schneider discusses a similar problem in her paper ‘Fruits, Apples, and Category mistakes’. When it comes to specifying which things can be play, she notices that there is a clear distinction – that is usually ignored within the philosophical discussion of play – between an activity as a category of event (e.g., a game) and the player’s individual participation in such an event. She says: “Playing is not a type of activity, but rather a mode of performing any activity.” (Schneider 2001, 158) However, she does not make the parallel distinction between the two meanings of ‘activity’ that I make. Accordingly, she draws a conclusion that I do not share: “Whether or not some particular activity is ‘play’ is determined not by the nature of the activity itself [...] but rather by the attitude of the player towards the activity.” (Ibid., 156) I would say that there is a meaning of ‘activity’ according to which the *nature* of an activity is precisely *dependent* on the agent’s performance of that activity with a certain attitude and/or intention, namely ‘activity’ understood as the series of actions of that particular player (within a game).



### 3 Instrumentality, autotelicity, and orthotelicity

I defined a player's activity as a certain series of actions (moves). These actions or moves constitute the activity. Many activities have an *internal instrumental* structure. This means that these activities have a particular internal goal or end that the agent tries to achieve. If that is the case, the constituting actions (or moves) are not teleologically disconnected acts. They are rather *means* to the activity's internal end and, therefore, governed by it.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> One might criticize that my distinction between activity and action is merely gradual. It could be said that actions, just like activities, are also composed of sub-actions and that what I call 'activity' seems to be just a 'long action'. One of the referees kindly called my attention to the work of A. N. Leont'ev who provides a stronger, categorical definition of activity. He defines activities – e.g. preparing food – as events an agent engages in with a *specific* internal goal in view – a motive which is, in turn, determined by some of the agent's needs or desires, such as the desire for food (Leont'ev 1972, sec. 5). In contrast to activities, single actions which, for Leont'ev, also constitute an activity do not aim at the satisfaction of the desire; they are performed only insofar as they contribute to the completion of the activity they constitute.

I find this proposal appealing, but it creates a problem if activities are engaged in as means to further ends. If my activity of preparing food for dinner has the *further* end of impressing my boss, the successful completion of *that* activity – preparing food – by itself does not satisfy my desire. In such a case, Leont'ev would probably say that the alleged activity of preparing food would be demoted to an action because he acknowledges the fact that “[a]n activity can lose the motive that brought it to life, whereupon it is converted into an action [...]” (ibid.).

I think that such an argumentative move is problematic for it would lead to the unintuitive conclusion that none of the events that we would intuitively call 'activity' such as playing basketball or going on a trip with friends would be activities *if* they are means to further ends. But there is another difficulty that is directly related to the topic of this paper. If activities are engaged in for the sake of satisfying some desire *in the end* (after performing a series of actions), there would not be any activity engaged in *for its own sake*. (That this is so will become clear soon.)

Due to these difficulties, I rather do justice to our intuitions and stick to the admittedly vague notion of activity as something that is constituted of a series of actions and that we would also be inclined to call 'activity'.

The task of this section is to show that activities with an internal instrumental structure can still be ends-in-themselves and, therefore, autotelic. At first glance, this assumption seems to involve a contradiction. Did Suits not famously contrast instrumental with autotelic activities (Suits 1988, 8-9)? But there is no contradiction here. We need to keep apart the *internal* instrumental structure of activities (which is consistent with autotelicity) from their being instrumental to *further external* ends (which is not consistent with autotelicity).

Notice that, when I say that a particular activity is an end-in-itself, I mean the activity *as a whole* is an end-in-itself. It does not follow that *each* constituting action (move) is an end-in-itself. The playful engagement in a game clearly involves several moves that are means to some end. As Schmid noted, “the particular action of throwing a baseball, when it is to strike out a batter, is a means to an end.” (Schmid 2009, 242; also see Royce 2011, 98). However, as I already indicated, this *internal instrumental structure* does not threaten the activity’s autotelic nature. As Lopez Frías put it, the fact that “instrumental action is an essential component of game play does not imply that playing a game is an instrumental activity.” (Lopez Frías 2020, 8) So, an activity can be *both* an end-in-itself whilst all of its constituting actions are means to its internal end. Aurel Kolnai called this peculiar telic nexus ‘orthotelic’. An activity is *orthotelic* if and only if it is “as a whole [...] autotelic and [if] its components are heterotelic [...]” (Kolnai 1966, 113).<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> At the beginning of this section, I said that *many* activities have an internal instrumental structure. Some activities that are autotelic do *not* have such a structure and are, therefore, not orthotelic. The examples that Suits discusses under the description ‘playing with’ or ‘idle play’ are instances of non-orthotelic but autotelic play activities (Suits 1977, 120-121). In one example, Johnny is playing with his mashed potatoes, and in another example, a man is idly stroking his beard. These activities are not engaged in orthotelically because they do not have an internal end in view. They are rather performed as a series of teleologically unrelated actions – a series that is continued only insofar as it is still fun, pleasant, or exciting. When

To illustrate that point, imagine you are baking a cake. Baking a cake is an activity with an internal instrumental structure. It consists of various work steps functioning as means to the internal end of having a baked cake. You break the egg to add egg white and yolk to the batter. Then you mix the batter to have it ready to be put in the baking tray. You do all of these things as part of baking the cake. Baking the cake is the whole activity, and all of the work steps are its constituents.

Now, it is possible that not only each work step is a means to some end (namely the internal end of having a baked cake), but also the activity of baking the cake *as a whole*. This would be the case if, for instance, you bake the cake to serve it at a birthday party. In that case, your activity itself would be a means to a further *external* end, namely serving the baked cake at the birthday party. This end is external because it is not part of the activity; it will only be fully achieved once the activity is completed. That the activity (as a whole) has such a further end makes it instrumental (to that further end) and, therefore, *not* an end-in-itself.

Now, suppose that you simply like or enjoy baking a cake. In that case, you might bake the cake with no external end in view. You just bake the cake for the sake of baking it. In this case, you still follow the work steps properly and do all of these things for the sake of having a baked cake as the internal end. However, you do not engage in the activity of baking the cake as a whole for the sake of something else that you achieve once the cake is

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Johnny drops some of his mashed potatoes on the plate, this particular action is not part of a larger plan.

Johnny is rather interested in what it leads to: Does it splash in a funny way? Do my parents get mad? And every subsequent action has a similar motivation.

Since the purpose of this section is to show that internal instrumentality is consistent with autotelicity, I will not focus on non-orthotelic play activities. However, the crucial point of the next section – that autotelicity is not necessarily inconsistent with the existence of intrinsic reasons – also applies to these activities.

baked. You might, in the end, eat it or feed it to your dog. It would be a tragic waste to throw it away. But that was not the point of your engagement in this activity. If all of that is the case, your activity was orthotelic.

It follows from the orthotelic nature of your joyful cake-baking-activity that the activity, which is done for its own sake, nevertheless aims at its own termination. It can, of course, be repeated potentially endlessly. You could repeat your cake baking activity multiple times in a row, and you might be inclined to do so because you enjoy baking cakes. But a particular cake-baking *instance*, insofar as it is orthotelic, aims at its own termination. This is so due to its internal instrumental structure. If your activity of baking the cake *as a whole* is an end-in-itself and if, at the same time, all of its constituting work steps are means to the activity's internal end, your intention will be to *properly pass through the whole telic process* of baking the cake from its beginning to its end with its internal end in view. You will not want to prolong any of its work steps unnecessarily because *none of them* is an end-in-itself. But you will also not want to skip any of them to 'get done' with the activity and to achieve its internal end because the activity *as a whole* (not the achievement of its internal goal) is what you were initially interested in. So, 'engaging in the activity autotelically' does not mean 'achieving its internal end'. It means to perform all of the instrumentally related actions in their proper order with its internal end in view.

Let me apply this analysis to playing games. Many philosophers of sport argue that playing *sport* games comes with an intention to *win*. Borge, for instance, argues that "sports have 'agonal qualities' where winning/losing or achieving/failing become an important part of the activity." (Borge 2015, 118) And Breivik claims: "At least in competitive sport, the central purpose is to win [...]" (Breivik 2022, 21; also see his 2007, 121). I agree with this

assessment. But this characteristic is not unique to sport games. I think that the engagement in any game is *victory*-oriented in this way (see Suits 2005, 48 and Kolnai 1966, 104-105).

One might worry that the ‘agonal’ character of game play speaks against the orthotelic nature of play. How can I still engage in a game for its own sake if I aim at victory? But there is no contradiction here. Assuming that orthotelicity and victory-orientation contradict each other means, again, to confuse the telic status of the activity itself with the telic status of its constituting actions. In fact, that playful engagement in a game aims at victory is a *consequence* of its orthotelic character. What we call ‘victory’ is just a specific name for the internal end that we try to achieve when we play a *game* (see Suits 2005, 48). When we engage in a game orthotelically, our activity *as a whole* is an end-in-itself whilst each single move is done as a means to winning this game. Winning a game is, however, *not* the telic end of our engagement *as a whole*. It is just the end of all our moves *within* the game. Compare this again to the case of your orthotelic cake-baking. You do not engage in the activity of baking a cake *as a whole* in order to have a baked cake. You engage in this activity for its own sake, but it is a part of the engagement in such an activity that you aim at having a baked cake in the end.

It is, of course, possible that an athlete engages in a game just for the sake of winning it because that victory serves another external end. Perhaps, the athlete wants to get the prize money. In this case, the athlete’s activity would indeed no longer be an end-in-itself because the victory would be a means to getting the prize money. So, there is a difference between two forms of telic reasoning that we need to keep apart – between victory *merely* as the internal end of the engagement in a game (which makes that engagement orthotelic)

and victory as a means to a further external end (which makes the engagement instrumental).<sup>8</sup>

The difference between these two roles of victory in the context of the participation in a game can be made more explicit by analyzing the opposite phenomenon of victory: *defeat*. If the whole point of engaging in a game is to get the prize money and if victory is a means to that end, losing that game would mean that the player's activity *as a whole* was a failure. If, however, the player engages in the game orthotelically, losing the game would not mean that the activity as a whole was a failure. Since engaging in a game *for its own sake* means to properly pass through the whole telic process with victory *in view*, the point of the whole engagement – even in the case of final defeat – would still be fulfilled. Even though it might be disappointing to lose a game, the orthotelically engaged player would still admit that the participation was worth it.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Some philosophers of play seem to disagree with my assumption that play and victory-orientation are compatible. Alfie Kohn, for instance, argues that the engagement in a competition is *goal*-oriented whereas play does not have a goal other than itself (Kohn 1992, 81). He draws the conclusion that “[...] competition and play tug in two different directions. If you are trying to win, you are not engaged in true play.” (Ibid., 83) However, it is not so clear if Kohn is *really* in disagreement with me. I share Feezell's suggestion that Kohn's notion of 'goal' rests on the equivocation that I just described between 'goal' as the *internal* end of all the activity's actions and 'goal' as the *external* end to which the activity itself is just a means (Feezell 2010, 163).

<sup>9</sup> Recall the Olympic Creed by Pierre de Coubertin: “The most important thing in the Olympic Games is not to win but to take part, just as the most important thing in life is not the triumph but the struggle. The essential thing is not to have conquered but to have fought well.”

#### 4 Autotelicity and Intrinsic Reasons

In the last section, I claimed that playful activities often consist of various actions that are means to an internal end. Then, I argued that this internal instrumental structure of playful activities is not in conflict with the activity's being an end-in-itself. Now, I need to show that the existence of intrinsic reasons is also not necessarily in conflict with the activity's being an end-in-itself. I focus on the most frequently mentioned intrinsic reason – *pleasure* including similar feelings such as fun and joy. At the end, however, I will briefly discuss *challenge* and a *meaningful life* as further intrinsic reasons. In any case, reconciling intrinsic reasons with autotelicity seems to be difficult. If asked why we play a certain game, we sometimes reply: “because it's fun!”, and, *prima facie*, fun is a further end to which the activity is a means. In arguing against Suits's account of play as autotelic activity, Schmid accordingly expresses the following worry:

It is exceptionally difficult to find any game or sport activity which involves the intentions of the agent to be separable from ‘some further purpose’. [...] Isn't playing a game because it is ‘fun’ (or because it's challenging, interesting, enlightening, etc.) a type of ‘further purpose’ which prevents that activity from being purely autotelic and thus not a candidate for play?  
(Schmid 2011, 154-155)

Also consider this passage in his earlier paper:

‘[F]un’, ‘enjoyment’, ‘pleasure’ [...] these psychological states are what is intrinsically valuable and one's participation in a sport is a means to that end. (Idem., 244)

Royce also struggles with Suits's assumption that autotelic engagement is in conformity with 'aesthetic enjoyment' and amusement but not with self-improvement (for the sake of a better social standing) (Suits 1977, 126, 129). Accordingly, he raises the question:

[I]s unclear why performing with the purpose of amusing oneself should not be described as an instrumental act, when to do so for one's good is. (Royce 2011, 100)

Schmid, of course, wants to maintain that a fun activity can still be play. However, for him such an activity is play not because it is an end-in-itself but rather because the player has the right motivation. I agree that reasons such as *fun* can be part of the player's motivation. But I disagree with the assumption that the existence of such a motivating reason *must be* in conflict with the activity's being an end-in-itself. The crucial error in Schmid's reasoning is to assume that these reasons are something 'further' and thereby constitute an end distinct from the activity.

First, let me recall and elaborate the distinction that I drew between an activity's being a means to a further end and an activity's being an end-in-itself.

An activity is a means to a *further* end if and only if that end is not part of the activity itself. We can specify this point by saying that the engagement in such an activity is supposed to provide the right conditions for that external end – be it another action, a product, or a state-of-affairs. The external end is the agent's final aim, and it *exists* independently of the activity itself. The activity is engaged in *only* insofar as it is necessary (or sufficient) for the achievement of that end. If possible, the agent would skip all the constituting actions of her activity. Consider again the case of baking a cake to illustrate this instrumental nexus: That baking a cake is a means to the end of serving it at the birthday party means that the agent engages in that activity *just* for the purpose of serving it at the birthday party. If she



could skip the process of baking, she would do so because the cake's *existence* does not depend on such an activity; the activity is just necessary (or sufficient) to produce it.

In order to be an end-in-itself, in contrast, the activity *itself* – the proper passing through the whole process – must be the final end. The point is not to provide the right conditions for an external end that exists independently of the activity. The point *is* the activity itself.

Now, does *pleasure* play the role of an end to which an activity is just a means? Do agents engage in certain activities simply because they provide the right conditions for a state of pleasure to come into existence? If that was the case, the pleasure and the 'pleasure producing' activity would be clearly distinct. Were it possible to have the pleasure experience without engaging in the activity, the agent would choose that option.

I admit that there are certain kinds of pleasure to whose realization some activity is just a means. Elation, relaxation, euphoria, ecstasy, as well as ticklings, shocks, thrills, and glows of desire, as Gilbert Ryle puts it (see Ryle 1984, 107-109), are such feelings that often play the role of an external end. People who consume MDMA to achieve a state of euphoria, for instance, treat its consumption as a mere means to the end of that enhanced feeling. There is nothing about the consumption *itself* that makes it worth aiming at. It is done only insofar as it leads to the euphoric state. The euphoric state is not part of the consumption. If someone does not like swallowing pills but wants to be in that state, that person would gladly enter dreamland without the uncomfortable detour. I think that riding a roller coaster *in order to* feel the thrill, taking a nap *in order to* be refreshed and awake afterwards, or masturbating *in order to* have an orgasm also exemplify such kinds of *instrumental* engagement for the sake of a pleasant experience.

The kind of pleasure that I am interested in and that is usually involved in playful activities is different. Engaging playfully in a game of basketball or playing a game of tennis because it *is* fun or pleasant differ from the consumption of MDMA for the sake of elation. To show this, I will borrow the notion of *acting from pleasure* that Candace Vogler introduces in her book ‘Reasonably Vicious’ to properly describe the phenomenon at stake.

In her book, Vogler clearly distinguishes between instrumental reasoning and acting *from* pleasure as two clearly distinct kinds of reasoning. She claims that acting from pleasure is not a special form of instrumental reasoning that treats a certain action or activity *as a means* to produce some pleasant feeling in the agent. She says:

[T]he happy contentment and sense of bodily well-being brought about by any of these [a massage, a mineral bath, or a nap in the hammock] is the *pleasure* and the things one does for its sake are the *means* to getting that kind of good feeling. This is *not* what is at issue in explaining actions done from pleasure. (Vogler 2009, 77)

The pleasure in the case of an action *from* pleasure, as Vogler continues, is not something that is gained as soon as some activity is completed. Instead, it ‘clings’ to the activity itself. It “continues throughout the course of doing what is pleasant [...] [and] coincides with and undergirds the whole of any pleasant engagement [...]”. She goes on to say: “In acting from and for pleasure, the delight is *in* the doing of an action of some kind *while* doing it.” (Ibid., 87).

It is important to understand Vogler’s emphasis not simply as an emphasis on a particular *temporal* relation – contemporaneousness as opposed to temporal succession. It is not just the case that the engagement in an activity from pleasure is contemporaneous to the feeling of pleasure in the sense that the agent experiences pleasure *while* engaging in the

activity. Such could still be an instance of instrumental engagement. The pleasant feeling would still be distinct from the activity, and the agent would still engage in it only insofar as it produces that feeling. But Vogler's point is stronger. She wants to say that "the pleasure is *intrinsic* to the act" and therefore "not separable from the action" (ibid., 81). It is intrinsic and not separable in the sense that it only comes when the agent is *fully focused on the activity itself*: It is, in other words, the pleasure of *absorption* and *immersion* in an activity. Vogler remarks accordingly: "Perfect pleasure, in the view I am urging, becomes not ecstasy, but absorption in what one is doing." (Ibid., 86)

Notice that this kind of pleasure – the pleasure of absorption and immersion – is consistent with autotelic engagement. Vogler adds that "actions done from pleasure are done for their own sakes rather than for the sake of attaining further ends [...]" (Vogler 2009, 89). This is so because absorption and immersion require that the agent *solely* aims at the engagement in the activity that she is immersed in. So, the word 'from' in 'acting from pleasure' does not introduce a further end to which the activity is a means; it rather indicates that the activity *is* pleasant, and it is pleasant *because* the agent engages in it for its own sake. In 'The Concept of Mind', Ryle provides an example of exactly that phenomenon:

To say that a person has been enjoying digging is not to say that he has been both digging and doing or experiencing something else as a concomitant or effect of the digging; it is to say that he dug with his whole heart in his task [...]. His digging was his pleasure, and not a vehicle of his pleasure. (Ryle 1984, 108)

Let me return to my previous example of playing basketball to further illustrate this point. Assume that you play basketball *from* pleasure. Of course, when you pass through the

stages of that activity, you necessarily engage in some instrumental reasoning: You perform your moves as means to the end of winning in the game. This is what I showed in section 3. However, you do not, parallel to that, also engage in a second strand of reasoning: You do not perform your moves as means to the end of producing a feeling of pleasure. Rather, the activity as a whole *is* pleasant for you insofar as you are fully immersed in it. In fact, you experience the relevant kind of pleasure *only* if you are fully immersed in the sportive activity (with victory in view). If, assuming that this is possible, you *set the explicit goal* of producing a feeling of pleasure and treat the moves of the basketball match as means to that end, you will, most likely, not have a pleasant time.

This concludes my argument for the compatibility of autotelic engagement and acting from pleasure (including fun and joy). But what about other intrinsic reasons that do not fall under that category, namely *challenge* or a *meaningful life*?

Let's begin with *challenge*. An athlete who engages in an activity because it is challenging might not act from pleasure. However, the telic role of this reason seems to be similar to the telic role of pleasure. The athlete's thirst for a challenge becomes satisfied only if he is fully focused on the challenging activity – if he aims at properly passing through the whole telic process with victory in view. He does not treat the activity as something that just causes the satisfaction of the thirst for challenge and that he would gladly skip if he could get that satisfaction otherwise. He engages in the challenging activity for its own sake.

The engagement in an activity because it is meaningful is also sometimes treated as being in conformity with the activity's autotelic nature. Breivik, for instance, argues that in valuing a sport activity as beautiful, ethical, socially bonding, or inspiring, we are treating it as meaningful and such meanings are “intrinsic since they are experienced during the

sporting practice and as parts of such a practice. They are connected with and anchored in the sport itself.” (Breivik 2022, 32). This is in accordance with what I and Vogler said about acting from pleasure. The telic role of such meaningful experiences is not that of an external end. They are experienced only insofar as the athlete is fully immersed in the activity itself.

## **5 Conclusion**

In this paper, I defended the position that play is an autotelic activity. First, I defined autotelic activities as activities that are engaged in for their own sake. Then, I showed that many autotelic activities have an internal instrumental structure: They consist of actions that are means to some internal end. I argued that such a structure is not in conflict with the activity’s autotelic nature. Finally, I argued that the existence of intrinsic reasons, such as pleasure (but also challenge, and a meaningful life), is also not necessarily in conflict with the playful activity’s autotelic nature given that the agent does not treat those reasons as further ends.

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