Beyond Things: The Ontological Importance of Play According to Eugen Fink

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BEYOND THINGS: THE ONTOLOGICAL IMPORTANCE OF PLAY ACCORDING TO EUGEN FINK

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Eugen Fink's interpretation of play is virtually absent in the current philosophy of sport, despite the fact that it is rich in original descriptions of the structure of play. This might be due to Fink's decision not to merely describe play, but to employ its analysis in the course of an elucidation of the ontological problem of the world as totality. On the other hand, this approach can enable us to properly evaluate the true existential and/or ontological value of play. According to Fink, by integrating beings into the imaginary play-world, we become able to transcend mere circumscribed individual entities and encounter reality as such in a new, more profound way. This positive ontological value of play is, however, forgotten because the imaginary dimension of play is traditionally interpreted as a virtual imitation of a model reality which already actually exists somewhere else. For this reason, Fink returns to the Platonic interpretation of play, which laid the foundations for this understanding, and offers a thorough critique thereof. Fink demonstrates how Plato's interpretation of play as a mirror reflection does not get to the essence of the act of play and how it stresses only its inessential traits. In reality, play is not a less real copy of an actual, serious action: the essence of the imaginary dimension of play is not to represent a circumscribed action, event, or being. As the analysis of its structure reveals, the proper essence of a playful action is rather to symbolize a certain whole, which is irreducible to its actual parts. Players thus necessarily understand individual realities with regard to the whole of the play-world in which they integrate them, i.e. they understand them differently than as objects.

1. Introduction

1.1. The Absence of Fink in the Contemporary Discussion on Play[1]

A former assistant to Edmund Husserl, German philosopher and phenomenologist Eugen Fink (1905–1975) wrote two philosophically compelling texts on play: in 1954, a short essay *The Oasis of Happiness* (Fink 1960b, 2012) and in 1960, an almost 300-page treatise *Play as Symbol of the World* (Fink 1960a). Remarkably, Fink understands play as an exceptionally important phenomenon that stands above other topics which philosophy might be concerned with: it is, according to him, 'a key phenomenon of a truly universal importance' (Fink 1960a, 54). Beyond that, among the 'philosophy of play' classics such as Huizinga (1955), Caillois (2001) or Suits (1967, 1977, 2005), Fink's work holds a special position due to its explicit accent on, and complex analysis of, the *ontological implications* of the phenomenon of play.

Interestingly, H.-G. Gadamer claims that 'the most original sense of playing is the medial one' (Gadamer 1975, 93), i.e. that play transcends the categories of subject and object and is, therefore, ontologically distinctive. Gadamer's analysis of play from *Truth and Method* is contemporary to *Play as Symbol of the World* and the author was aware of Fink's work (cf. Gadamer 1961). Although both authors perceive play as an ontologically specific and promising phenomenon, Fink's work seems to get much deeper into the problem, while Gadamer only dedicates 30 pages to play. Fink's attention is more precisely drawn to the possibilities of rethinking one of the key ontological topics of the twentieth century, Heidegger's *ontological difference* between particular beings (*Seinden*) and the Being as such (*Sein*) (cf. in particular Heidegger 1980, 1998). Fink's investigation takes ultimately the form of a meditation on the 'world' as a whole, in a sense close to the understanding that pre-Socratic philosophers had of it, and its relationship with individual beings contained in it.

Although the way in which Fink elucidates the ontological potential of play has, as we intend to demonstrate, the power to be very instructive even 60 years after it was written, the attention it receives in the contemporary philosophy of sport does not come close to reflecting this fact. Fink's philosophy of play, although it is also rich in concrete descriptions and structural analyses, is virtually absent in the sport philosophy literature today. One of the versions of the author's shorter text on play (1960b) was included in an older anthology on philosophy of sport (Morgan and Meier 1988) and was briefly referred to by a number of earlier sport philosophy authors (Esposito 1974; Meier 1980; Schmitz 1988). However, for example, in the recently published 200-page special issue on *The Philosophy of Play* edited by Routledge (Ryall, Russell and MacLean 2013), there is only a single marginal reference to Fink (2012), while his bigger and the most important book (1960) is not discussed at all.

Although Kretchmar (2008) does include Fink's name on his list of authors interested in play, he does not develop Fink's ideas any further. The author is never mentioned in the articles on philosophy of play published in the last years (cf. Chad 2011; Davis 2006; Feezel 2010; Kreider 2011; Morgan 2008). We did not find any reference to Fink in any of the issues of the *American Journal of Play*, either.

The first of the reasons for the lack of attention to Fink's philosophy of play seems to be merely circumstantial: at least as far as the English-language sport-related literature is concerned, Fink's reception seems to be handicapped by the absence of an English translation of his most important book, *Play as Symbol of the World*.[2]

However, the other and more important reason seems to be connected with Fink's philosophical argument itself. Fink turns to play in order to polemicize about our contemporary self-understanding and to explicitly demonstrate its limits. For Fink, play is not a mere 'behavior' (Fink 1960a, 233, in English in the text), it is not an empirical reality like other facts extractable from human nature and the human world. As the author states repeatedly in his major book, he is not interested 'in play itself', insofar as it is a factual, empirically observable and describable phenomenon; his principal goal is neither to formulate an empirical description of play nor a 'phenomenological' one (cf. e.g. Fink 1960a, 228). Fink's goal is rather to 'elucidate the meaning of play' (ibid.), i.e. to rethink the positive descriptions of play in order to draw philosophical implications from them. Yet, in line with its meaning, play has to be understood precisely as a phenomenon, which questions the very notion of fact and the corresponding understanding of man, and his world, as something factually observable, as something which can be grasped from the point of view of an empirical description. Fink states that it is precisely in play, which is an 'experience familiar to everyone' (Fink 1960a, 69), that we can find a 'practical understanding' which *goes beyond* the realities as individualized and factually describable elements.

1.2. Play as an Ontological Problem

This is where we get to the very core of Fink's analysis of play: for him, play is nothing less than a phenomenon leading us to an ontology which is radically different from that which we usually practice when concerned with things.

The realities as we understand them in our ordinary experience simply are what they are – they are enclosed in their particular limits, they are 'objects' or circumscribed beings, *Seienden*, as philosophers say. In Parmenides' words, we live in a world, where *being is* and *non-being is not*, and their

mixture is, at least since Plato, always an illusion, a lack of reality. Our naive, everyday self-understanding, on the basis of which the empirical sciences are also built, is itself profoundly marked by the ontology of modern times, which is in its turn rooted precisely in such major Western figures as Plato, Aristotle, or even Parmenides himself. In the contemporary world of science and technology, we feel more than ever before that real is only what is observable without doubt, describable without rest, thus repeatable and manipulable.

If it is true that we usually measure the degree of reality by the degree of certainty, it is easy to note right away that, as has been said, the outcome of play is always uncertain. In this way, Fink asserts that the phenomenon of play is, for the metaphysical tradition, an 'unpleasant trouble' (Fink 1960a, 64), a counter-example for its ontological understanding – for it is in its essence precisely a mixture of being and non-being. Players do not play simply with what is factually given and describable: mere objects are not enough for play to take place. Objectively, players and playthings are 'irreal' as what they are in play. As observed from the outside, the 'imaginary' dimension of play is not actual, it is a non-being. *In reality*, my range of possibilities of motion *is not* restricted as it is in every case of play taking place on a playing field. In every play or game, I need to respect some sort of rules and the rules are not natural laws, they are 'imaginary', not actually existent laws of worldly events and of human action.

Thus, if we respect the structure of play and the way it unfolds, it cannot really be described from the 'objective' point of view of an empirical description, for be it described in this way, it would be destroyed and the players and playthings would remain what they are *outside* play. In consequence, if we strive to understand play, we need to adopt the perspective of play itself, which is that of players, or of its understanding spectators, not that of those who describe it as a matter of fact.

At the same time, however, play only takes place *in* real time and space: it is precisely the 'real' which is 'used' or 'employed' in it. When I move on a playing field, I also change place in real physical space which observes its specific laws. Or, if I become too absorbed in the last half of a match, it is also the real time I spend, so I can miss my train the departure of which is scheduled in it. Or when I take over an imaginary role (e.g. Hamlet, goalkeeper), I do not cease to be the actual person who I am in my usual life, rather, I invest my personality in play. As Gadamer observes, we need to acknowledge that 'one can only play with serious possibilities' (Gadamer 1975, 95); or, as Suits explains, play requires a 'reallocation' of extra-lusory 'resources' (e.g. Suits 1977, 123–125).

From this perspective, play is precisely *a mixture of something real, actual (factual entities integrated into the play) and something irreal, non-actual (the imaginary play-world)*. In other words, the problem refused and unresolved in the metaphysical tradition, of how to conceive a mixture of being and non-being, is

practically solved in play. This means simultaneously that *players act according to a different ontological understanding* than for instance the modern-times-rooted science and all those who try to grasp reality 'in the forceps of attention' (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 195), striving to fix it inside the limits where it is a pure being, devoid of nothingness or indetermination. Play is, for Fink, a reminder that the reality is not a sum of relationships between objects which can be defined as pure beings. Interestingly, such position is in accord with some of the most progressive thoughts of the twentieth century science, for which the problem of indetermination is frequently crucial (e.g. in subatomic physics or chaos theory).

So in order to understand play, we need to understand simultaneously how it *transcends* mere realities (and mere empirically observable 'behavior'), and how it *is connected* to them – we need to understand the intertwining of the 'objective' and the 'imaginary' dimension, of the 'actual' and the 'non-actual'. The specific problem of play introduces us to a general ontological problem, which in turn serves for Fink as a basis for an elucidation of the question of the world as a totality transcending the sum of its elements. Fink himself thus turns back to the pre-metaphysical thinking of the pre-Socratics, such as Anaximander and Heraclit, for it offers some important clues for taking play itself as a model of the relationship between the individual elements of reality and reality as a whole.

In this way, apart from the positive formulation of Fink's own philosophical position, his argument on play has two critically oriented segments in which he questions two different ontological interpretations of the relationship between the actual and the non-actual dimension of play. In the first of these segments, he argues that play is not a virtual copy of an actual action taking place in 'normal', 'serious' life, i.e. that the non-actual dimension of play is not derived from the actual dimension. In the second segment, he argues that play is not a virtual copy of a supernatural event taking place on the level of gods' action upon humans (as conceived in the cultic game), i.e. that the non-actual dimension is not derived from a sort of supra-actual dimension.

Both of these arguments, each of which is thoroughly developed in Fink's *Play as Symbol of the World* (1960), lead to his positive thesis, according to which the world as such has to be understood as an all-embracing, all-powerful totality, irreducible to a mere composition of inner-worldly individual entities, i.e. it must be understood as *play reigning over mere individual things and thus holding their actuality and their non-actuality together*. Unfortunately, Fink's play-based cosmological theory as a whole is very complex and its presentation would go beyond the scope of a single article. For this reason, we would like to dedicate the following text to a presentation of *the first critical segment* of Fink's argument in order to enable to draw some conclusions from it regarding our usual understanding of play.

The first attempt to reduce the imaginary, non-actual dimension of play to a weakened version of the actual, objective world was introduced by one of the main founders of the 'metaphysical' tradition, by Plato. It was this author who first made an attempt *to derive the imaginary play-world from the prosaic world of empirical objects* and thus to 'metaphysically' get rid of the intertwining actual – non-actual, which Fink holds to be the essence of play. For this reason, the main section of our text is dedicated to a presentation of Fink's critical analysis of Plato's interpretation of play.

2. Fink's Critique of Plato's Metaphysical Interpretation of Play

2.1. Play as Action

As we have said, the question of actuality and non-actuality is a general ontological problem. The Greeks, who set up the fundamentals of our ontological thinking, usually understood the highest mode of actuality as *activity*, for above all, they opposed the actual activity to a mere potential for it. So what kind of activity or action is *play*?

Play is an action, but according to its ordinary interpretation, it is a kind of action which is not integrated in a purposeful series of actions of our serious life. In our usual, everyday living, we only maintain ourselves in existence throughout time by choosing and losing our possibilities. All of our actions have consequences for our life and, once accomplished, cannot be undone. We only have to carry on the burden of this situation, we are 'condemned to freedom'. Play, on the contrary, is an action which is neutralized in regard to all other actions: it does not bind us to anything, it can be interrupted in any moment without changing our life in any respect. Fink asserts that play is purposeless, i.e. not derived from the overall orientation of life, whose ultimate goal is to pursue self-preservation. All of the actions during play are only 'as if', false or seeming actions, for here, none of our decisions deprive us of our possibilities to exist. Playing itself does not decide on anything, but it copies in various ways life, where every moment is decisive (Fink 1960a, 79).

As Fink writes furthermore, 'we enjoy the possibility to get back the lost possibilities in an undefined, unbound mode of existence' (ibid.). Most of the time, play develops in a happy mood: having the opportunity to freely try new possibilities, we engage in them with a joyous excitation, we enjoy the illusion of being whoever and of doing whatever, of having all the possibilities open. The joyous mood of play seems to be fundamentally linked to its illusive non-actuality, for it is thanks to this specific quality that play is able to thoroughly transform the cheerless reality of our everyday lives.

Since play is, *as action*, mere non-binding testing of possibilities without any inevitable implications, a mere paraphrase of serious life, we feel as that it

has to be valued negatively and judged inferior in regard to all normal actions. Less action is less being and since play does not perform any real action, since it is only 'as if', it seems indeed ontologically inferior. This aspect is most evident in depicting plays such as theater: the role is an imitation of something. Here, play is not a subjective appearance, but an objective illusion: it is an *imitation*, a mirror image of an actual reality, therefore inferior in regard to its *model*. Fink summarizes this 'common-sense' interpretation by stating that play contains as its constitutive trait 'a paraphrasing of serious life in the element of appearance' (Fink 1960a, 76). Play alleviates the burden of our existence, so its only value resides in its beneficial influence on our regeneration – the non-serious play is finally good only for helping us to get back to the seriousness. In sum, as action, play as an imitation: it repeats in its non-actual scenery the 'serious' dimension of life, while relieving its burdensome and binding character, which makes it joyous as it is. And as an imitation or appearance of real beings, play is of an inferior ontological value.

As we can see, this structural conception of play, mostly acceptable even to our contemporary understanding, includes already a judgment of value, and it seems that the judgment cannot be but negative. In order to get to the roots of this understanding of play as a phenomenon of an inferior value, a non-serious imitation of serious action, Fink returns to Plato's interpretation of art as τεχνη, craftsmanship, which is also applicable to the phenomenon of play.

Plato conceives the action of 'poets', which includes all artists and also the authors of play-drama, according to the model of craftsmen. As a carpenter builds a boat according to a reasonable plan, which can also be called the 'essence' of the boat, a 'poet' also creates his product according to a model, an actual object or event. According both to Platonic and Aristotelian theories of artistic production, the action of ποίησις, creative production, is therefore that of μίμησις, imitation. There is, however, a fundamental difference between the craftsman and the poet, which makes the latter an *inferior* craftsman: a craftsman's product is a real, actual being, whereas a 'poet's' product is an appearance, a non-actual being. According to Plato's hierarchical ontological plan, neither artist's or player's actions give being to anything. The non-actual 'appearance' of art and play is ontologically inferior in relation to an 'actual' concrete being – which is of course, in its turn, ontologically inferior in relation to the invariable idea, according to which its existence must be built and organized. All transitory perceptible things are copies of permanent ideas; therefore play, as an appearance depicting such transitory things, is a copy of a copy, an imitation of an imitation. Plato has found a reason for play to be banned from his ideal republic.

If play were a non-serious copying of the serious life, Plato's model would be assuredly correct. Or inversely, if we perceive play in this way, it

might be because we are still linked to Plato's way of understanding the world. In the opinion of this philosopher, the universe is organized according to a rational principle, so the world as we experience it is the result of the victory of an intelligent 'cosmological τεχνη' over an unintelligible matter, χώρα. Since play is, on the contrary, a purposeless action without a goal, it is itself unintelligible and must be placed at the very bottom of the universal ontological hierarchy – let alone the Heraclitean idea, that the cosmos itself is a play. Fink summarizes Plato's perspective in contrast to the Heraclitean as follows: 'What is created by the intelligence is itself intelligible: *it is not* a purposeless play, a dance of things, unintelligible emerging and disappearing of transitory beings.' (Fink 1960a, 92–93).

2.2. Play as Mirror Reflection

Up to this point, we have seen why and how Plato interprets play as a copy, as a non-serious, non-actual *image* of a serious, actual action. At this point, Fink brings our attention to the fact that both the relationship between the being of a perceptible thing and the being of an idea, and also the relationship between the non-actual dimension of play and its supposed actual model, is interpreted by Plato on the basis of an analogy with the *mirror reflection, as known from the perceptive experience*. A transitory perceptible object is, according to Plato, a *reflection* of an invariable idea, and a man-made image of any type (play included) is a *reflection* of such a transitory object or event; moreover, *both are reflections* as a shadow of a tree or its shape on water surface are reflections of a real tree.

Fink suggests to critically analyze Plato's model in order to see whether it is actually applicable to play. So the question is, for him, whether the relationship between play and what play 'is about', is identical with the relationship between an object providing its surface for a mirror reflection and another object which is reflected or 'represented' through it. To these two dimensions, Plato attributes an identical, inferior ontological status, pointing to the fact that both are 'non-actual', 'appearances'. Fink, however, invites us to distinguish more carefully between the two phenomena.

The 'irreal' dimension of an image is not a subjective error of perception, but an 'objective', intersubjectively observable appearance. This means that in order to be able to appear and represent something else in the medium of appearance, the non-actual image needs the actual reality as its 'bearer'. The object and the shadow we see on it, for example, are both real, but as soon as we recognize another object in the shape of the shadow, i.e. as soon as we see it as an image of something else, there is a new dimension of 'non-actual' existence, which is now 'superposed' *over the actual thing*. The irreal image can

therefore only exist in connection to its real bearer, only as mounted on the object's proper organization and structure.

Plato, however, identifies an image with a reflection *without analyzing* the way in which these two kinds of 'irreal appearances' are bonded to their 'bearers', the real objects. This is precisely the reason why Fink thinks we have to raise a fundamental objection to Plato's conception of play as a mirror image: the structure of play cannot be interpreted as mirroring, for the latter requires a *simultaneous existence of the actions mirrored, which can be, but not necessarily is the case in play*. Granted that play is an imitation of something or an image, we have to pay attention to the fact that the image itself is capable of becoming independent of its model, which is not the case for the reflection. This happens in a variety of ways: if the image had any model, it does not need it once it is fixed (e.g. photography); if it had a specific model, it could transform it (e.g. painting); finally, it might have never had any and still show something, have a meaning, or 'speak of' something (e.g. abstract painting). Between the actual imaged object and the imaginary dimension of the image, there is thus not necessarily a relationship of two objects, of which one would be an independent model and the other would be a parallelly existing, dependent copy. The image is also conceivable more independent from the original, or even as an image without any original at all (Fink 1960a, 104–105). And the argument applies very well also to play, even if we conceive it as image: the non-serious playing is not necessarily bound to a set of parallelly developing actions in the domain of the serious; the player does not depend on a parallel existence of a 'model' of what he is doing; the inventor of play is not bound, either, to imitate actually existing actions or events which would serve as models or the 'originals' for his production. In sum, *the structural relationship between the 'bearer' of the 'appearance' and the 'appearance' itself is different in the case of an image and in the case of a mirror reflection. If play is an image, it is not a mirror reflection*. In other words, Plato did not present any reliable reasons for which we should conceive play as an imaginary imitation of serious life.

There seems to be a good reason, however, why Plato passes over this difference in structure. If he chooses the structure of mirroring as the model for his interpretation of art and play, it is precisely because he wants to stress only the aspect of displaying, or representing, and therefore to derogate the aspect of playing itself, which in turn enables him to judge play as an inferior case of displaying. The mirror only mimics illusively what already is actually, therefore everything artists and players do is, according to Plato, that they create illusive imitations without real existence, they merely repeat the superficial shape of something that already actually is somewhere else. In other words, the mirroring is absolutely non-productive, that is, it is a mere superficial reproduction, whereas a poetic-playful activity is in fact productive, since it

establishes its structures without the need for a guidance from a preexistent model. In sum, the fact that Plato chooses the reflection as a model for his interpretation of play reveals that he attempts to deform it: he is not judging its value based on its thorough structural analysis, but, by means of choosing a fitting interpretative scheme, he forces it into a preconceived ontological hierarchy where it is necessarily inferior.

2.3. Play as Image

These objections to Plato's description of play do not entail, on the other hand, that the interpretation of play as image, the structural analogy between play and image, has absolutely no validity.

The first point to stress is that according to Fink, Plato's interpretation is 'not mistaken' (Fink 1960a, 102), but rather too strictly 'disenchanted', and therefore 'fatally one-sided' (Fink 1960a, 114). Plato carries out his description merely from the outside, not from the perspective of play itself. It is the perspective of those who see how play has *just ended* and how the players are returning from it to the 'serious' life. The player is thus only described from the disillusioned viewpoint of those who see him 'taking off his mask', stepping out of his role and becoming a *mere* actor, a *mere* player. Now it seems to be clear that the actor merely *mimics* the hero or the god, that he is not actually one; now, the actor is a mere actor, not anymore a medium to reveal the hero, the god, etc.

Correlatively, we must assert that Plato does not sufficiently determine the depicting, image-like dimension of play, and understands it exclusively, and thus insufficiently, as a reference of an imitation to its model. Concentrating only on the *reproductive, repetitive* moment of play, Plato ignores its *productive, transformative* dimension – focusing only on what is *depicted* by play, he loses the action of *depicting* itself, the playing itself. Moreover, it is clear that if we understand the reference to some other reality, which we find in play in the form of its 'play-world', as a reference of a copy to its original, then the copy is necessarily derivative and inferior, and the way is opened for play to be devaluated.

In sum, Plato loses the phenomenon of play as a whole, for he ignores the *interpenetration* of its imaginary and real dimensions, the imaginary-implanted-in-reality. If the non-actual dimension is necessarily linked to an actual 'bearer' in order to allow a play-like representation, Plato's mistake is to assess both the structure and the value of the whole phenomenon only according to the supposedly non-productive, non-actual – therefore ontologically inferior – *represented* being. Thus for sure, play is an image, it shows something other than itself insofar as it is a prosaic reality, but a

unilateral accentuation of the relationship to a possible model, leading to an isolation of the imaginary dimension from its actual bearer, does not allow for a comprehensive view of play as an integral phenomenon and ignores the perspective of play itself.[3]

2.4. Play as Symbol

Correlatively, we can free ourselves from the depreciative Platonic interpretation of play and get back to the integral phenomenon, *if we make place for the actual action of play itself, as opposed to only concentrating on what is supposed to be depicted by it and judging it not-actually-existent in play.* In this way, Fink underlines that 'the actuality of playful action is ceaselessly and permanently creative in regard to the 'non-actuality' of the play-world' (Fink 1960a, 81–82) and thus frees the play-world from the status of a mere imitative repetition.

It is precisely because play 'paraphrases' life in the mode of 'non-actuality', only 'as if', that it is not bound to a supposed 'actual', 'serious' model and can lay out its structures in a more independent way. Moreover, the transformative ability of play is based precisely on the way in which its non-actual dimension interpenetrates with the actual one, for the imaginary dimension gives a specific meaning to the material which bears it. The prosaic realities become something else as they enter the imaginary play-world. This means that the relationship between the two dimensions, whose interpenetration is fundamental for play to take place, is hardly conceivable as a relationship between two beings, one of which would simply replace the other or would be conceivable independently from the other, for again such an interpretation would lose the phenomenon as a whole.

In the light of these explanations, there is also the following point to stress: we can concede that play very often 'depicts something', but as the imaginary play-world is unthinkable without a relationship to the real elements it stands upon, this depictive, image-like nature of play cannot be interpreted as a representation. Consequently, although play always 'refers' to something, Fink asserts that *play is not a sign, an individual being 'standing for' another individual being,* for the relationship between its actual and its virtual dimension is not a relationship between two individualized, circumscribed beings inside the world. According to Fink, *the virtual dimension of play rather is to its real dimension as a whole is to a segment of it.* Since play integrates actual elements according to a non-actual, imaginary dimension and thus combines them together within a particular whole, play is the bringing into presence of a more important totality into one of its segments. In one word, play is a *symbol* of the totality which is being presented through it. If play, for Fink, is a

symbol of the world, this means that the individual realities we encounter inside the world are, when integrated into play, again connected with the totality of the world from which they were separated insofar as understood as circumscribed individual beings.

3. Conclusion: Play Leading beyond the Metaphysical Understanding of Reality

The main goal of our article was to present Fink's reasons for refusing the 'metaphysical' interpretation of play, according to which the relationship between its imaginary and its real dimensions is ultimately understood as a relationship between two circumscribed objects (*Seienden*). We have seen how Fink demonstrates that the juxtaposition of the two dimensions interpreted in such a positive way requires an ontological devaluation of one of them in order to preserve their difference through which play is constituted. Thus, the non-actual, imaginary dimension of play becomes a 'copy', a 'virtual' imitation of an actual 'serious' action or event, and play as a whole is devaluated in regard to its model. From this perspective, play with its intertwining of the actual and the non-actual is an ontologically inferior phenomenon.

Fink is himself interested in the general implication of this problem, i.e. his attention is more oriented toward the question of the world as such and of how to conceive of its differences in regard to beings which it contains (the ontological difference between *Seienden* and *Sein*). However, his analysis of play also has a strong potential to affect how we concretely understand it. If we confront Fink's conclusions with, for instance, the texts of Huizinga, Caillois or Suits, we see some important differences. According to Huizinga (1955), playing is an activity through which we learn rules or principles of action which, once used in 'real' life, make us pass from a supposed natural state devoid of rules to a properly human and civilized universe. According to Caillois (2001), there are four powerful psychological instincts which are expressed in their pure form by four types of play; the societies we live in mimic these types of play (or their specific combinations); the social life is therefore a 'corrupted', inferior copy of play, which is itself calqued from the human psychological meta-reality. Finally, Suits (1977, 2005) does not seem to attribute any change of ontological status to the 'resources' as they are 'reallo-cated' from the instrumental to the lusory context, even under the supposition of a 'utopian' state of affairs (cf. in particular Suits 1977, 123–124 and 126). The structure of playful action is, for him, based on an objectively apprehended reality in the same way as in the case of an instrumental, self-preserving behavior – it is only employed to a different goal. Thus, although the dynamics of exchanges between the 'play-world' and the 'actual' world is different in

each case, it is evident that the aforementioned authors share the fundamental structural characteristics of play as conceived by Plato: the principal relationship between the imaginary play-world and the real world is conceived of as a relationship between two objectively apprehensible realities calqued one from the other. It is clear, in particular in the case of the first two authors, that this relationship can easily become that of a model and a copy.

However, the interpretative scheme of play based on a relationship model-copy seems to be incompatible with up-to-date empirical evidence (at least as reported in the case of animal play), because the relationship between the non-serious, supposedly 'imitative' behavior and its 'serious', supposedly original counterpart seems to be circular (cf. Pellis, Pellis and Himmler 2014). Similarly, from Fink's philosophical perspective is visible, that the aforementioned interpretations of play can be interpreted as reductive, inasmuch as they miss the *interpenetration* of the actual and non-actual dimension of play, which also means its transformative impact on realities. According to them, nothing really happens when the real elements enter into play, for *they remain what they are outside it*: by merely becoming a 'virtual' copy, 'corrupted' version of themselves, or a differently employed 'resource', the nature of their identity is untouched. Realities are thus conceived of as objects, i.e. as devoid of any indetermination and therefore indifferent in regard to the fact that they exist in the context of play or of an actual action. This is how the actual action of play, i.e. the interpenetration of the actual and the non-actual is missed, for the imaginary dimension of play does not have any actual transformative influence on the elements it integrates and these elements do not have such an influence on it.

Yet, the playing requires a capacity of integration of things as they prosaically, familiarly are into a new dimension, where the very meaning of what they are is now co-dependent on the relationship to the other elements and, together with them, to the whole in which they are integrated. As we have indicated in the beginning, the world of play is not *made of* the game equipment *as things*, the stage set *as paint on cardboard*, the playing field *as a physical space*, the players *as real* persons; all this *is used* in play, but the sum of real elements used in play *is not enough* for play to take place. Instead, play integrates these real elements in itself, and, by doing so, it shifts their meaning and their mode of existence according to its play-world. The duration of one real day, for example, can be represented in theater in one minute: since the space and the time of play do not simply copy the rules of actual space and time, since the imaginary world is differently structured, it requires the elements of play to undergo a transformation in order to conform with it. Therefore, as the realities as we know them from our usual experience are necessarily restructured in play, it is impossible to understand them as 'copies', 'virtual' versions of exactly what they are outside play, or simply the same elements differently used.

Playing thus requires *a different understanding of the reality itself* than that of 'objects'. For in order to be able to integrate such and such realities into the context of the play-world, players need to understand these same beings differently than in the 'instrumental', 'prosaic', 'serious' context. More precisely, the players need to practically understand what the realities, as they prosaically are, will become when integrated to a different, specifically structured whole upon which their traits will now depend, which of their yet-imperceptible aspects will become decisive as a part of the equilibrium of play. Players do not understand the elements of play as independent of their context, as 'objects', but rather as endowed with a specific potential, or a range of indetermination, which becomes actualized in a specific way depending on the whole of the play-world and the concrete way it unfolds. In that regard, players' understanding of being practically transcends the understanding of being as presented by the metaphysics.

Notes

1. The author would like to thank prof Ivo Jirásek from Palacký University in Olomouc, Czech Republic, who brought his attention to the possibility of developing Fink's analysis of play in the context of sport and provided several useful references (cf. Jirásek 2003).
2. A translation was, however, envisioned in the 1970s, see Krell (1972, 63), note 1. Since the author is not a native English or German speaker, it has to be stressed that the goal here is not to establish a definitive vocabulary. The reader is invited to confront his/her understanding with the original German text.
3. Fink's analyses of the way in which play appears to us are, in our opinion, an exemplary case of a *phenomenological description*. The existence of such a positive model should be highly valued, since the 'phenomenology of sport' still does not seem to have cleared up its fundamental principles (cf. e.g. Halák, Jirásek and Nesti 2014).

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