Glory to the Fools:
Ambiguities in Development through Play within Games

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Review Essay:

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1. Introduction and Overview

Life is play—even in its most dramatic and tragic forms. Human beings play different roles in their dramas, ranging from the "politically correct" colourless persons to politicians, village idiots, advertising tricksters, and—last but not least —social scientists. The latter—in their efforts to be taken seriously—often forget that theirs is a kind of play, or—a play upon play. KOEPPING's volume fills in a major gap in the coverage of the "unserious" social roles that are abundant in the history of religion and folklore, but which social sciences can fail to recognize. [1]

The volume brings together contributions that cover a large field of phenomena— from ritual processes to "free play". The contributors come from those areas of the social sciences where closeness of the theoretical ideas is still appreciated— ethnology, anthropology, dance, education, study of religion and philosophy. Through the materials presented in the book, the reader can experience a refreshing glimpse of literary, folkloric, or ritualistic descriptions of ethnological richness of detail. Materials from different areas of the World—from Ancient Greece (KOEPPING's own analysis of ambiguities in Greek myth and ritual— chapter 6), or its Germanic counterpart (Jarich OOSTEN on play in Germanic mythology—chapter 5), tribes (Terence TURNER's description of the ritualistic

"scaring of children" among the Kayapo—chapter 7), or from Asia—are brought together to illustrate the complexity of human play. The Asian material dominates in the book. Friedhelm HARDY (chapter 3—on Indian perspective on the ludic), Don HANDELMAN (chapter 4—including a beautiful example of playing dice with deities), Saskia KERSENBOOM (chapter 8—meaning construction of divine power) and Bruce KAPFERER (chapter 10—comparison of ludic phenomena in Sri Lanka, Bali, and Australia) brings to the readers a large array of phenomena which should put to rest the naive hopes of those scientific role—players who continue to believe that psychology can be a "science of behavior". The play of the endless variety of mutually transforming Hindu deities with basic psychological issues surely turns the focus of attention from their behavior to the meaning of the acts depicted. [2]

The theoretical bases for the coverage in the book are skillfully and intelligently brought so as to make sense of the phenomena. They do not dominate the stories told. George Herbert MEAD emerges as a root "self theorist", the focus of Mikhail BAKHTIN on polyphony of voices and carnivalization is visible in the book. One can even find a reference to the ideas of Lev VYGOTSKY. Gregory BATESON's, Michel FOUCAULT's and Victor TURNER's ideas are brought in to bear on the issues. Even the widely used complexive term of Pierre BOURDIEU's —habitus—finds its place on the stage of the book, where it becomes an equivalent of dharma in the Hindu meaning system (KERSENBOOM, 1997, p.196). Clearly the value of the book is not in the following of any of the ideas of the ancestors, but playful construction of new directions that could be adequate to capture the complexity and variability of the human cultural reality. [3]

2. The Core of the Human Drama: Fearful Joviality

It is quite remarkable that the social sciences tend to overlook the unity of opposites in the complex wholes. In psychology, one can see the separation of intertwined opposites into "variables" which may be claimed to be "measurable". Thus, one is inclined to code (or rate) either "fear" or "happiness" as it seems to be present in a human cultural event, such as a celebration. Birthday celebrations are supposed (at least for many) to be "happy" occasions, funeral rituals—"sad" ones, etc. Yet on many occasions the opposites are embedded within the same whole. A military unit consisting of young men (or, in our egalitarian world, even women) in their best uniforms may cheerfully march by the crowd of their adoring parents, wives, girlfriends, and concubines during a military parade. Speeches may be made by/to them as to the glory of (always) defending some worthwhile cause. The soldiers then proceed to the carnage of their battlefields, and from many of them only posthumously awarded medals may remind their relatives of that jovial glory of "dying for one's country". Similarly, public executions in 17th Century Colonial America were public ceremonies of joy related with horror. The unity of opposite feelings is the norm, rather than an exception, in human personal and public existence. [4]

Most fearsome dangers may lead to efforts to cope with them that turn the fear into its opposite. In the Hindu mythology,

Cholera and other epidemics, personalized as a goddess, can be held at bay by celebrating feasts in her honor, with lots of singing and dancing and general merry-making. Even the more refined gods in their palace-like temples want to be kept entertained by music and dance. Their devotees, in their single-minded quest to add to the glory of the temple, may become tricksters and robbers or even murderers, or become pimps and run around naked. In secret nocturnal rites in the cremation ground, excrements may be eaten, urine drunk, fornication and perhaps even murder committed. Antinomial saints openly challenge with insults and biting logic a fossilized religious establishment, and whole branches of more sophisticated literature satirise religious hypocrisy and all the other masks behind which the real person tries to hide, or where the ruthless but clever cheat, by his fit, achieves his immoral ends. (HARDY, 1997, p.83) [5]

So the social reality of personae (persons within masks—or masks within persons) entails constant, ongoing dialogue not only with the social reality as that is, but as it could be (or, for some of the actors, should be). It is precisely the indeterminacy of any communicative message—the tension between its descriptive and prescriptive functions—that creates the stage for meta-communicative constructions such as joking, irony, sarcasm, etc. The depth of reflexivity of human communication and meta-communication makes it possible to construct complex roles. [6]

3. Fools and Non-fools: Ways of Being Human

The nicety of human existence that allows us all a playful presence in our lives is the role of a fool. In fact, the stern refusal to accept that role by anybody who claims not to possess that widespread characteristic (i.e., "non-fools") can be viewed as a special category of fools (e.g., "anti-fool fools"). Hence making sense of different kinds of fools is a major task for a serious social science. Burkhard SCHNEPL (chapter 2) attempts precisely that. He develops a heuristic typology of fools, which reminds us of the pains and pleasures of acting like Groucho Marx, Buddha or Jesus Christ, or Don Quixote. SCHNEPL's playful (admittedly non-conclusive) typology includes figures known to ethnologists, anthropologists, or sociologists—such as "idiot", "trickster" or "parasite". These different roles need not have the same pejorative meanings that may cloud them in our present-day common thought. For instance,

The Greek *idios* means "private", "attaining to one individual only". In this sense, the idiot is first and foremost an individual who does not participate actively in public life, either on account of actual imbecilities or in consequence of a step he has undertaken consciously and deliberately. The latter kind of passivity may manifest itself as religious withdrawal from the world, as in the case of Buddha. Another idiot is Jesus Christ, who in contrast to Buddha does not turn away from the world, but establishes passivity, simple-mindedness, humility and peaceful tranquility as virtues within the world. (SCHNEPL, 1997, p.67) [7]

In contrast, a trickster is a kind of a "non-good citizen" of rather outgoing kind:

> ... he stands in stark contrast to the good citizens he encounters in villages and towns on his travels, leading settled and respectable lives. The trickster's driving ambition is to make fun of these simple-minded but often rather greedy and selfish persons and to play tricks on them at their expense. His ultimate aim is to get at their food, beverages, and money, and, last but not least, to play around with their wives. (SCHNEPL, 1997, p.58) [8]

Some of these foci have been encoded into modern roles of advertisers, insurance specialists, and journalists. An extension of the trickster is that of a parasite (meaning—in Ancient Greece—"an invited and welcome guest, often a philosopher"—SCHNEPL, 1997, p.60). The "parasite fool" (or "court jester")

> ... seeks to find and develop a stable and sedentary symbiotic relationship with one good person, typically the holder of high office and as such a man of power and hegemonic knowledge. ... The jester may have been allowed to speak his mind freely because, like children, he was seen as standing outside of the feudal order of estates. (SCHNEPL, 1997, p.61) [9]

Thus, one can have freedom of expression within a social order when that social order defines the agent as if the latter is not part of that social order. Yet that "other" is precisely a part of the social order because of being set up by that order. Here we have a good example of the making of "the other" and the role of that "other" for the definer. A "social parasite" in the form of a philosopher, scientist, or a comedian can have guaranteed freedom of expression within his (or her) role-defined genre of expression as long as that genre is carefully separated from the social processes that maintain the status quo of current social power. The moment that separation becomes questionable the freedom of expression may become curtailed. [10]

All eight types of fools in SCHNEPL's typology—trickster, court jester, the "Groucho Marx type", the joker, the idealist (Don Quixote), the idiot, the clown, and the divine fool (Jesus Christ)—play out the dynamic hierarchical drama of the human society. Their roles are opposed to that of the "good person" (or "moral person") who follows the social rules in a monotonous and serious (non-playful) ways. The dialogue between that monotony and its overcoming through play makes a society open for development in ways similar to a child's development taking place within the "zone of proximal development" of individual and socially guided play. [11]

4. Indeterminacy of the Person:
   Dancing on the Boundary of Fool and Non-fool

The beauty of living is in its undesired unpredictability. Any person develops through the unity of different roles assumed. A gossipy housewife ("moral person" or "non-fool") goes around discussing delicious details of the licentious lives of some suspected community member. She may turn into a Don Quixote type of fool who fights for the "standards of morality" in her community. Yet all this is a result of her binding within the ambivalence of whatever is (for her) "moral" versus "immoral". She is—in my favorite trick of constructing new concepts by uniting the opposites (e.g., "independent dependence"—VALSINER, 1997) —"immorally moral" (or "a foolish anti-fool"). The active dealing with "the other" (the targets of the gossip) is of relevance for the gossiper's own self. A story re-told by Friedhelm HARDY in the book provides further color:

> While traveling, two monks come to a river and meet a girl who is weeping, since she is scared to cross the rapid current. The older monk picks her up and carries her across on his shoulders. Then the two monks continue their journey. After a very long time, the younger one asks: 'Does it not say in our monastic rules, that a monk should not touch and preferably not even look at, a woman?" To which the older one replies: "I put that girl down on the other bank of the river, but you are still carrying her in your mind'. (HARDY, 1997, p.96) [12]

Indeed, policing the transgressions of social rules by others is a powerful way to play with such transgression oneself. Societies set up conditions under which such self-boundary-play passes as valued socio-moral "conscience". There is always an ambiguity about the identity of "good citizens" ("moral persons") who may turn into their opposites when circumstances change. The more the emphasis on the "guarding of the rules" one can find in the case of a "moral person" the more likely it is that this fixation covers up the opposite side of the person. Lack of playfulness can indicate rigidity, and rigidity blocks the possibilities for construction of anything new in the personal world. What remains is mere choice between the opposites, and depending upon circumstances that choice can flip-flop between the opposites. Surely there is social support for making that kind of orientation to be the ideal of "good person"—a consumer who slavishly accept the choices given to him or her by the social power institutions, and even glorify one's slavish dependency upon "making the right choice" as if this were the ultimate freedom of the human being. A good consumer is not socially dangerous, and may lead to the profits the producers desire. [13]

5. Play and Game Rules

In play, existing rules can be transcended. In games, their rules are upheld. Yet it is necessary to play "by rules" yet in ways that do not follow the rules. It is here where the semiotic mediation makes human beings free—from the confines of a situated activity context. The unity of game and play guarantees the relative conservatism of all psychological and social processes. These processes are over-regulated by meanings (OBEYESEKERE, 1990) which result from the ever-

present construction of social norms (SHERIF, 1936), which in their turn are fortified by constructed hierarchies of meanings (VALSINER, 1998). Yet it is precisely that redundant regulation that sets the stage for persons to transcend the current order, to create relative disorder in the next moment of their existence. [14]

Still, in the beginning there is the human body. The persons who play—within game rules—necessarily act with the totality of their body-mind systems. As a result, all construction of meaning in one's relation with the social world (and its internal counterpart—the personal-cultural world) is rooted in the moving body in its experiential context. The bodily activity is the basis for development of psychologically distanced regulation systems:

> By way of gestures, paradigms, and words, human world-making 'extends' beyond social praxis and the body, with its activity related to the physical senses. The lowest level, the elementary level, constitutes the practical creation of the world in social praxis. This occurs with the help of the Practical Sense. Gestures, with their 'dual use', represent a generalization of the human body, an 'extension' in another medium, in language games involving gestures. *The 'dual use' and the game, with its framework and conformity to rules, with the exchangeability of positions and the organization of an internal world as facilitated by the game* are the principles that distinguish the symbolic media as a whole from social praxis. (GEBAUER & WULF, 1997, p.54, added emphases) [15]

It is clear that an account of human cultural existence that views only its external manifestations—behavior, or activity—cannot provide solutions to the question of how can human mind develop. The centrality of embodiment is obvious—yet it leads to transcending (rather than following) the present world of situated activity. The human meaning-making system does not tolerate monotony of being, and tests out the boundaries of possible new becoming in the testing of the boundaries of the existing through novel inventions. Game rules lead to play with the rules (and their possible change), creating the boundary field filled with constantly reconstructed tension through the opposition KNOWN<>UNKNOWN. Play is an excursion into the domain of the unknown on the basis of the known. Hence it is the artists and (some) scientists who remain playful over their life course, rather than the "moral persons" who relatively soon graduate from their childhoods to adult concerns with "doing thing right". [16]

6. The Relevance of Fools

What follows from this analysis is the recognition that all human social progress depends upon human actions high in immorality—or, to re-phrase, filled with the playfulness of the different kinds of fools. The role of the "good persons" is merely to create a boundary conditions that lead some fools to attempt to transcend those, no matter what kind of transcending it may be. Yet the change in the social (and personal) worlds can come also through socially suggested changing of the game rules. Consider one of the recent transformations of the public places through a playful scheme of an artist—CHRISTO's veiling of the

German Reichstag in Berlin in 1995. An event that is part of ordinary construction processes in city building—veiling of a building from outsiders' view while its reconstruction is done by builders—became re-framed as an act or art, and a social installation of previously unknown kind. This socially introduced new event, led to new personal-cultural constructions:

> The veiling, which was initially considered by many people as dubious experience, a political or economic stunt, was finally perceived as a 'splendid experience' by over five million visitors. Observations showed that not only did people begin to interact freely with the art-work but, more to the point, the happening induced multiple spontaneous interactions, discussions, led to the gathering of a crowd over many hours in peaceful and approving unity and amity and snuggling children in the veiling cloth. Lovers shared the lawn through the night, dancers had their moving reflections enlarged on the cloth at night, and hundreds of spontaneous ludic performances such as dances and musical impromptus went on at the same time. (KOEPPING, 1997, p.13) [17]

By introducing an altered game (e.g., a symbolic building suddenly veiled, or freedom of movement made possible by the reverse of veiling—like breaking down the Berlin Wall in 1989) the search for new forms of play is enabled. What forms it takes is uncertain, but the liberation from the previous game rules sets the field of innovation open for all kinds of fools. As such liberation is potentially dangerous for the social power institutions, usually care is taken to set limits upon the potential novelty of actions that may emerge from a situation of game rule alteration. The phenomena of carnivalesque, temporary reversals of roles that BAKHTIN (1990) has described are examples of carefully controlled changes of game rules. [18]

7. Behind the Veil in Human Societies

Given the psychological distancing between the personal-cultural and social worlds (see the "dual function of gestures" above), all human games that are set up constitute a veil of a kind. That veil creates the situation of hypergame—a game where the playing participants do not know exactly which game rules apply (and how) at the given time. Thinking about human actions in terms of hypergames has been pioneered in economics (e.g., HARSANYI & SELTEN, 1988), but certainly the phenomena described in the book under review are even more realistically hypergameous. [19]

Participating players in a game may think that the rules by which they operate are known to all, and function the same way for everybody. This assumption would not apply in a hypergame situation. Here some of the players, some of the time, can alter some of the rules. Such changes would certainly occur at times of advantage to the rule changers. For example, in the recent years (during the economy boom) the public talk about evaluation of companies on the stock market made explicit that there are two kinds of rules—one for "new industry" (technology, internet) where the issue of companies' earnings was not part of the evaluation; and the other for the "old economy" companies (where earnings

would be relevant for evaluation). Together with the crash of the "technology bubble" in 2000 in the stock markets, the talk about the "no-earnings-rule" for "new economy" has vanished, and the "old economy" rule is again the basis for evaluating the "new economy" companies. [20]

The rules can change slowly, as well. The life course of human beings leads to the gradual transformation of the games people play. For instance, the game of "being in love" between two persons may end at the time when the wedding bells ring, to be replaced (unilaterally, by one of the partners) by a "marriage game" ("as my husband I expect you to be X,Y,Z"—"as your wife I will be A,B,C"). The other may not even recognize that the game rules are being changed, and continue to play around the previous rule system. [21]

8. The Play of Social Scientists

The volume *The game of gods and man* is a nice testimony to the playfulness of the social scientists. It is sophisticated in its coverage of complex cultural materials, daring in the different interpretations set forth, and dismissive of much of rigidly accepted general scientific knowledge. In that, it does extend the horizons of the social scientists—at least of those scientists who appreciate the playfulness and artfulness of the basic science. Yet these are the readers who can take the ideas expressed in the book further. The book is therefore warmly recommended to the best of the scientists—who are, in the full spirit of the book —the best fools of the humankind. [22]

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