

# CHAPTER ONE

## CHILD PLAY: ANTHROPOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

### 1.1 CHILD PLAY: ANTHROPOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

A child clearly is a playing being. Educators are eager to know whether child play has any educative significance. To find out, the playing child needs to be understood in the educative situations (pedagogic situations) in which he finds himself playing. From the pedagogic situation, the playing child is viewed phenomenologically in his being on the way to proper adulthood; this means that for a real understanding of the playing child-in-education, no more suitable point of departure can be found than the reality of the educative situation itself. Such a phenomenological evaluation gives rise to the fundamental anthropological truth that a person is the only being who educates, is educated and is dependent on education<sup>(1)</sup> and lends himself to it<sup>(2)</sup>.

From an early age there is a dialogue between child and world and play is one of its most meaningful forms. The most natural way of dialogue between child and world is a playful involvement with it. This play, as dialogue, is a means of being educationally involved with the young child. Initially, there is a period of few purposeful, planned educative encounters during which play is used purposefully as a means of educating. However, as the child becomes older, the significance of play for purposive education becomes clearer.

Child play is a child's spontaneous involvement in dealing unsystematically with a still unknown although alluring world that now and again appears to be other than it seems<sup>(3)</sup> but that entices him to continually attribute meaning to and receive meaning from it. In this connection, it should be emphasized that a child lives in an open world with which he openly communicates. This includes a variety of possible ways of dialogue of which play is a fundamental one. The child and his world form a unity because he is directed to and stands open for it. The meanings he attributes to the world, and each of his behaviors and expressions constitute a part of his being-in-the-world, of his meaning-giving communication with his world. The child is openness and his play as a means of

communicating is a fundamental part of his dialogue with the world since a young child still has insufficient language at his disposal for a linguistic dialogue. In other words, a child's play is his most meaningful dialogue with the world.

Heinz Bollinger<sup>(4)</sup> says: " Initially, a little child plays with his limbs, his fingers, his hands, his legs, his mouth, his tongue and the sounds that he can make. He plays with things in his immediate environment by feeling them, throwing them to and fro, etc. This kind of play is called function-in-practice". The following two questions now arise (see sections 1.2 and 1.3):

## 1.2 WHAT HAPPENS WHEN A CHILD PLAYS?

A person is an active being. It is clear that his activities can occur on different levels. Thus, e.g., thinking activities are on a different level than playing activities, an adult's playing activities are on a different level than a child's, etc. When a child plays he places himself in the world in a particular way. Through playing, he designs his own future possibilities. This character of design shows itself very early in his first playing. Playing with his limbs and their functions determine his future relationship with his bodiliness. In this way he acquires an unrestricted positive relation to his body, bodiliness and sensuality. Only later is his involvement with his body, its organs and functions, restricted by educating. By his playing involvement with his bodiliness, his "sensuality", he has an abundance of desirable experiences that are enjoyable or fulfilling. In this way his immediate relationship with his bodily-being is grounded in positive meaning.

In early child play, the first combination of all of the senses is possible as are perceiving, imagining, relating and beginning thinking, not to mention the first activities of the hands. In and by playing, the situation in which the playing child is becomes united as a totality with what he plays with. Thus, it can be said that: Child play is playing in the world in which his entire being-a-person is involved. In other words, playing is a truly existential way of being. All future potentialities are foreshadowed and tried out in play. This means that play is directed to promoting a future. When play occurs, a child's potentialities are formed (designed). The adult's horizon and way of being-in-the-world are co-dependent on the designs that are made in early and late childhood play as well as in the hearty play of puberty. Although a child's play is actualized

in the present, futurity is foreshadowed in each act of play. The world of play is called the oasis of joy<sup>(5)</sup>. The child's play has a fulfilling character and is enjoyable which constitutes its character of paradise.

Human being-there (Dasein) is characterized by futurity. Because the future can be gradually and progressively actualized in meaningful ways in the present, it is and has to be foreshadowed in play. A person is a person because he is not imprisoned in the past and the present. In playing, he anticipates his potentialities and embodies his higher and highest potentialities. Only through this anticipation is he in a position to progressively understand and actualize his potentialities in his historical existence.

The significance of play for a person's becoming cannot be emphasized strongly enough. A child's early playing with his bodiliness (organs and their functions), although its content is nothing in particular, also has a future-opening significance. Thus, a small child does not play something distinct but plays his being-a-person and plays to his future.

The ability to play is a fundamental way the child influences his becoming. That is, it is an influencing that child existence (Dasein) forms in particular ways in that it progressively orders and gives form to child-living. This view of play has particular significance because it emphasizes the encounter. After what has been said thus far, it should be clear that play, as a matter of personal becoming, really involves an encounter with the approaching future. In playing, the future is not only designed but also is progressively made present and actualized. In a situation of encounter, there is playing, designing and actualizing. It needs to be pointed out that encounter constitutes an undeniable part of all human anticipations (expectations) that he then also introduces into his playing existence and which eventually have to lead to a truly personal encounter. For the small child, all encounters actualized have the character of the personal, i.e., truly personal being and this is saturated with the personal. Personal encounter is really meaningful encounter and occurs on the basis of the anticipation that the encountering person sought for will be found in authentic ways.

In playing with his mother's breasts, especially if he turns himself away from his mother and then returns with obvious feelings of

delight or noticeable happiness, the initial anticipation of looking for personal encounter is actualized. Hide-and-seek is another early child game of the same nature. It can be observed that two month-old children try to hide themselves behind the curtains of their cribs and then become exceedingly happy if the mother notices this willful play and also hides and both players once more disappear from each other and then appear again. The anticipation of personal encounter, searching for and finding someone are exemplified by this play. In this way an anticipated later, authentic, conscious, fulfilling inevitable relationship of personal encounter also is designed. For a child old enough to grasp, it can be observed that any thing, e.g., building blocks, put in his little bed for him to play with, is held over the side of the bed and after a brief hesitation is dropped. The child expects that someone will put this thing back in his bed again. He begins this play each time anew and repeats it countless times. This play can be understood as follows: A child identifies himself with the plaything. With this, he identifies himself with it because for him this entails a personal encounter with everything he meets and experiences; this encounter is accomplished through this identification.

It is clear child play is a meaningful way in which his encountering being-there (Dasein) is actualized. Play is the fundamental way in which child being-in-the-world is actualized.

### 1.3 WHAT IS MEANT BY PLAY?

In the early philosophical tradition, play was seldom treated thematically. All the same, one finds in Plato, Aristotle, Cicero and others discussions of play as a metaphor for human existence and as a cosmic and god-like resemblance. The play metaphor appears not only in philosophy but also in specific religious literature, in numerous myths and in the bible.

Only late in the history of Western philosophy has play enjoyed explicit philosophical attention. The first thematic philosophical consideration of play was written by Schiller in **Über die Ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen** (On the esthetic education of persons). His philosophical approach is a specific explanatory theory of play. Schiller indicates that a too one-sided definition of play is dangerous because instead of considering play as a totality, particular aspects can be over-emphasized. Such over-emphasis leads to an incorrect image of what play is in reality.

Also in contemporary descriptions there are arguments about the metaphorical and literal meaning of play. Since the publication of Huizenga's masterpiece, **Homo Ludens** (Man the playing being), persons such as De Bruin, Buytendijk, and Sassen say that he includes too much under play and that consequently one can call everything play.

#### 1.4 A PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERSTANDING OF PLAY

Many writers correctly observe that play is a fundamental form of a human beings way of existing in the world. This means that play is an existentiell (Heidegger), that is, a fundamental feature of being-human. Thus, it cannot be eliminated from the human world in thought and action as though it had no significance. J. Huizenga is in agreement with this thought when he declares that with play one deals with an unconditional, primary category of life<sup>(6)</sup>. H. Scheuerl<sup>(7)</sup> argues that play is a fundamental phenomenon that cannot be inferred from or explained by other phenomena. E. Fink<sup>(8)</sup> notes, following A. Peters, that play (as are love, conflict and work) is a fundamental aspect of human Dasein.

However philosophically clarifying this discussion might be, it also is necessary to distinguish play from other fundamental features of being human (existentiellia). The philosopher cannot rest with the given temporal-spatial forms but has to grasp the phenomenon as it appears by bringing to light its essentials and meanings. Playing is an original way of being and this means that this existentiell finds its most adequate expression in an ontological rather than a psychological or sociological conception. This means that play has to be investigated phenomenologically in order to disclose its essential meanings and their relations with other events. Such a philosophical reflection on play has three phases: The first phase involves the phenomenological description and disclosure of play as such. The second phase focuses phenomenologically on the horizon within which the phenomenon of play occurs. The third phase places the entire phenomenon of play in the light of human reality as a totality. The question is what is the ultimate ontological meaning of this way of being; in other words: what is the fundamental sense and meaning of play?

#### 1.5 A PROVISIONAL EVALUATION OF THE WORLD OF PLAY

Viewed phenomenologically, one must start with the phenomenon of play as it is observable in its daily occurrences. One can begin by contrasting play, antithetically, with the serious world of work. In this contrasting light, work is an activity that aims for a useful result. It is a reflection of a matter-of-fact aim. Work is directed to making the world habitable. A person's assurance of existing arises through work. An atmosphere of constraint, seriousness and necessity permeate this event. Work appears as very real because a person cannot live without the fruits of his labor.

In contrast with work, play is an activity that does not occur for the sake of particular outcomes or results but for the sake of the activity itself. Also, when "play" strives for a victory, it no longer is playing. The activity of playing occurs almost by itself. It is free of difficulties and it is spontaneous, frolicsome and not serious while work is an area that arises from tenseness and tension.

From this somewhat logical conceptualization of play and work, the differences between them are apparent. However, this matter needs to be phenomenologically broadened and deepened. The phenomenological method also provides a perspective on the different tensions between both concepts. As a phenomenon, play shows a more pathic (emotional) attitude toward reality. There is no mention of being directed to work but to an act of play. The world of play is a form of interaction and mutual communication. Playing with someone and something means not only that I play with someone but also that someone and something plays with me. If play and concern are fundamental forms of a human way of existing then the question is what their mutual relation is. For the sake of convenience, if play is interpreted as antithetical to work and the serious life, then the fundamental form of play remains in the contrasting shadow of concern and is not done justice. One will then incorrectly interpret the phenomenon of play if it is viewed merely as a diversion from or as purely superfluous to life.

The world of play and of work shows a mutual connection and harmony. The world of play requires, in harmonious ways, the consolidated (firm) world as a place to play in. The "real" world offers the true possibility for the illusive (make believe) world of play. It puts one in a position to be playing-in-the-world. But conversely, play promotes new discoveries and also is constituted by them<sup>(9)</sup>.

## 1.6 THE SPATIALITY OF PLAY

The meaningful structural aspect of the phenomenon of play is its closedness: play occurs in its own domain and sphere. It is separated from the ordinary world and has its own field of play and rules. The playing person acts differently than in everyday associations. This "difference" is the distinctiveness and definiteness of play. A space for actualizing play is symbolic of a delimited environment. A person can play only in a "cleared" sphere. E. Fink rightly calls play an oasis of joy in the desert of everydayness<sup>(10)</sup>.

For a clear insight into the play-existential, a hermeneutics of this closedness and distinctness is important. It would be incorrect to understand and delimit the spatiality of the phenomenon of play's being-here from the being-there of the surrounding everyday world. In this way, one is driven to the question of why and from what the being-here of the world of play is segregated. The emphasis on the player turning himself away from his concerns and directedness and then living without concern and limits in a world of play is a one-sided interpretation. The distinctness and authenticity of play is, in this one-sided interpretation, viewed as a denial of a factual limitation that can be expanded without limit. This occurs by discovering the distinctness and authenticity of the phenomenon of play on the basis of the fact that the factual givens can be surpassed, e.g., work is exceeded in play.

E. Fink speaks of an inner space that is "nowhere" and yet is "there" because of the unreal sphere of being that is and yet is not<sup>(11)</sup>. One searches this "nowhere" for support in the "somewhere" of the factualities of life. The illusive spatial character of the world of play does not mean a lack of reality but rather the acquisition of increasingly more reality. Thus, play is a particular way of unlocking or disclosing reality.

The apparent limited nature of the world of play is, as it were, the landing place, the potential ability for the actual abundance of play. The closedness of the world of play is not a being closed in opposition to the external world.

It is a focal point from which the power of the ordinary world emanates. Play takes place within a closed space and rejuvenates work. A person plays earnestly, authentically and with reality. He

does not allow himself to be limited by the factualities and contents of the play. He also plays with these limits.

The world of play is not so much something separated, but it is something exceptional while being interwoven with the everyday. In play there is no evidence of surrender. It does not progress rectilinearly. In play, there is no opposition but rather a reciprocity between here and there.

The closedness of play is characterized by an intimate connectedness. Here the trustworthy is mysterious and the mysterious is trustworthy. Familiarity and unfamiliarity, the expected and the surprising flow into each other. This reciprocity of familiar and unfamiliar, of expected and unexpected expresses an essential of play.

The surprisingly unfamiliar in the world of play has to be interpreted differently from the strangely unfamiliar that a person recognizes in the everyday life of concern. In everyday life there is a contrast between the familiar, as what is usual, and the unfamiliar, as what is strange. The less familiar something is to a person, the more it lies outside of his experiential world.

Because play is not intentionally directed to anything, nothing special is expected. It is the expectation, as expectation, that is experienced in play. The primary concern is not the something played with but the play itself.

The interpretation of the spatiality of play indicates a dialectic hierarchy between play and care as higher and lower fundamental forms. This involves two complementary, relatively independent fundamental forms that are related to each other such that the world of play is not separated from the world of concern but rather the world of concern is separated from that of play. The world of play communicates with the world of concern. A person can play only if he surrenders himself to the play. Play is not so much an act as it is an event.

## **1.7 THE TEMPORALITY OF PLAY**

Also time appears very differently within the sphere of everyday concern than within that of play. From factual reality, one looks at the temporal limitations of play in terms of the experience of the



succession of past, present and future. Play has a duration but the inner time of play surpasses a chronometric temporal sequence and is characterized by a timeless presence, by an eternal now. Just as in play no distance is traveled there also is no period of time experienced.

Indeed, there are games such as hockey and football that have precisely prescribed time periods. Play lasts for a particular time. If this doesn't happen, it begins to lose its form and then it lasts too long and also the preceding play becomes undermined and boredom sets in. The temporality of the world of play is characterized by an eternal now. The factually defined length of time insures that the eternity is not an endless duration. Play needs unlimited time to go beyond reality and play with it. With its inner infinity, strictly speaking, play knows no end. Only a human being sets limits from the outside and makes himself weary of play. The phenomenon of play remains open to repetition. This repetition continually gives new and original form to the play.

Also, play does not have a clear beginning; the factual beginning only means entering-playing. A person turns himself over to play and is not aiming at satisfaction. Play will not give rise to satisfaction. The player seeks an eternal moment in an endless time.

Even when a person satisfies particular biologically colored needs and desires, play arises as a fundamental form. Here is found the meaningfulness of play therapy, namely that a person will not let himself be dragged along by a blind passion and in playful ways desires are elevated to a higher level. A person does not so much play a game but rather the game plays (with) him. It is because of this that play diagnostics is possible.

The world of play shows a curious structure that seemingly includes strange contradictions. This world possesses, as it were, a double ground. It is simultaneously real and unreal. The playing little girl experiences her doll as her child and herself as the mother. Yet she doesn't think that the doll is really her child and that she is really the mother. The playing child does not mistake herself.

When a child becomes so swept up by the imaginary that his play no longer can be distinguished from reality, then he flees from reality and no longer plays. Play becomes one-sidedly unreal because

reality is playfully let go. However, a child who clings to reality and cannot progress to illusive play is not quite free.

Child play moves between two limits: on the one side is the limit of reality and on the other the limit of unreality, of pure fantasy. Play is neither of these but rather it is both. The world of play is essentially ambiguous. This ambiguity is not a reflective awareness but is playfully experienced<sup>(12)</sup>. An ambiguity can only be experienced within a playful attitude. Therefore, the sphere of the world of play is not real. The child plays with real toys; yet because of their smaller dimensions they are actually unreal and for this reason, they can evoke the imaginary.

This double dimension of reality and unreality is not only characteristic of child play and of the youthful time of life. One also encounters this double dimension in the play of adults when they are really "youthful". When happiness or sadness are portrayed in a play (e.g., comedy, drama), the on-looker does not experience real happiness or sadness, but also as the actor laughs or cries he does not "live" his mood as an unreal experience. Here appearance and reality are not confused for a moment. Indeed, the on-looker is a co-player in the play.

Play as play symbolizes itself as a modality of human freedom that moves in a circle between possibility and facticity. Human existence, as the unity of can-be and factual reality, loses its freedom as possibility when its actualization, its engagement is avoided. Play exists in experiencing the "between". Therefore, play is not the freedom itself. Freedom will actualize that which can be as far as possible but play is the tangible expression of itself as a modality of freedom.

C. Verhochven<sup>(13)</sup> says " play does not create but only offers possibilities". Play offers possibilities to reality and actualizes reality as possibilities. The pedagogical significance of play lies here. It is not so important **what** is played but **that** there is play. Thus, freedom and creativity do not form play in any sense but are actualized in a playful attitude, in a playful disposition.

Play is playing with images because only images allow dynamic possibilities to show themselves that factual, objective reality cannot. In the sphere of play, things take on different appearances. For the player, this is not viewed cognitively as an object but is

experienced in an affective attitude as an image. Thus there is reciprocal communication, and the image should be approached with respect and should not be used aggressively for one's own aim. The image goes beyond the situation of harsh, unambiguous facts and offers possibilities and surprises. In play it appears that reality and the image contain possibilities that are not entirely real and yet also not unreal<sup>(14)</sup>.

However, play is not so much a play with images but rather playing with images is a means of playing. One can say that the playing person plays in the world of the image, of the symbol. The illusive aspect of play with its ambiguous relation of image-reality can become disturbed either from the side of controlled reality or from the side of uncontrolled fantasy.

Play can represent something but in play this representation does not happen as it does in art. Play is actualized around play in images, around the to and fro between image and reality. Thus an essential of play lies not for example in the fact that wooden blocks or dolls represent something but it occurs around the to and fro of the movement. Thus, art comes into being not as play but as culture **in** play, as J. Huizenga also says:

Each symbolic expression or lived-experience is playful because of the reciprocity maintained between expression and what is expressed, between the symbol and the symbolized. It is just by this playful and ambiguous to-and-fro that the expression differentiates itself from a discharge as a "living out". Therefore, when play is viewed psychologically it possesses a certain degree of catharsis and this lies not so much in what is expressed, as such, but in the way it is expressed<sup>(15)</sup>.

## 1.8 THE EXISTENTIAL VALUE OF THE PHENOMENON OF PLAY

When a philosopher wants to understand the ontological meaning, i.e., the essentials, of the phenomenon of play he has to allow himself to be addressed by play as phenomenon. Play does not imitate but represents, portrays and makes a higher reality visible. The image makes the person an onlooker in the sense of a participant in a deeper human occurrence. In this way a person is open to the symbol that appears in a higher sense. Through play a person steps out of himself and turns himself over to a world that

has been conjured up by play. Play is the to and fro between playing and being played. Play does not play itself outside of a person. A person undergoes play but this undergoing is an active participation and positive induction and joining in. Consequently, play diagnostics is possible. Play also does not play itself within a person; play asks a person to adopt a self-forgetting attitude. When the "doing" character of play is too much in the foreground then the person also remains too much in the foreground and he stays horizontally directed. Only in a playful attitude can the depth dimension of life become vertically apparent. In a playful attitude a person discovers that **"playing is finding"**<sup>(16)</sup>.

## 1.9 PLAY AS "BOUNDARY PHENOMENON" OF LIFE

It appears that play is meaningful for the interpretation of the sense and meaning of life and of the world. Therefore, play diagnostics is possible. To say that play is a boundary phenomenon of life is to express the precise sense of the essence of play. Play is the frame, the framework of life. Here one thinks of a painting. The frame captures the radiating power of the painting and allows the power of the work of art to show itself better. The frame around the painting delimits it from its surroundings in a remarkable way. What is remarkable is that the limit of the frame is not limiting but rather renovating. Without the frame the power of the representation would chaotically flow away. Thus, play as boundary phenomenon of life creates a space for the emerging sense of life. The world of play delimits itself from the ordinary world. It requires its own separated place. It knows its own dress, laws, language and rules. Thus, to really understand the essentials of play, the world of play itself has to be taken as the point of departure for study.

### Summary

The preceding philosophical reflection on play allows one to see that play is a fundamental phenomenon of universal scope. Human and thus child play is a meaningful theme out of which all fundamental basic concepts and existentiellia such as intersubjectivity and intentionality can be thought about. Playing provides a person with an open horizon without which his ideas and experiences of reality are distorted. Play is the frame within which reality appears. Playfulness is a person's existential practice. Play does not mean a one-sided separation from the category of work--play lies precisely in between (reality and imagination). Play is the

highest realm for a person; it is a particular way of being creative on a human level.

As a particular human way of being it should also be worthwhile to view child play from other perspectives. In this study child play is viewed from fundamental pedagogical (chapter two), psychopedagogical (chapter three), pedotherapeutical (chapter four) and practical (chapter five) perspectives.

## References

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- (10) See Gadamer, H. G., **Wahrheit und Methode**, Tübingen, 2e druk, 1965, 102.
- (11) Fink, E., **Oase des Glucks**, Freiburg/Munchen, 1959, 30-31.
- (12) Plattel, M. G., **De Filosofie van het spel en het spel van de Filosofie**, 281.
- (13) Verhochven, C., **Rondom die Leegte**, Utrecht, 1965, 120.
- (14) See Buytendijk, F., **Het spel van mens en dier**, Amsterdam, 1932, 137.
- (15) Plattel, M. G., **De Filosofie van het spel en het spel van de Filosofie**, 284.
- (16) See Buytendijk, F., **Het spel van mens en dier**, 97.