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Games

Fortunately, there is only one variety of human being. The mind reels at the prospect of outlining the political and social scenes that would arise if there were as many kinds of human being as there are kinds of cats. The effort to define the specifically human is therefore consistent with the search for what is generic about people. Expressions such as "homo sapiens", "homo faber", and "animal laborans" are the results of such efforts. The first considers reflection (theory), the second creativity (history), and third activity (practice) to be the characteristic feature of human beings. I would suggest that these three efforts fail when human beings are defined in comparison to their own apparatuses, rather than to animals. For apparatuses, too, lead reflective, creative and active "lives". I will therefore attempt a fourth approach, namely from the standpoint implied in the expression "homo ludens". That is, I will take human beings' capacity for play to be their defining characteristic. This is the post-theoretical, post historical and post-practical standpoint of the last third of our century. There are a few terms to define. "Game" is a system consisting of elements that regularly combine. The sum total of the elements is the game's "repertoire". The sum total of the rules is the game's "structure". The sum total of possible combinations from the repertoire within game's structure is the game's "competence". And the sum total of the combinations from the repertoire that have been realized is the game's "universe". Three games will be considered: chess, language games, and the natural sciences. The repertoire of chess consists of the board and the chessmen. The repertoires of a language games are the words in the dictionary for that language (Portuguese, for example). The repertoires of the natural sciences consist of the symbols specific to them. The structure of chess is its globally consistent rules. The structure of a language game is a grammar (i.e., the grammar of Portuguese). The structure of the natural sciences is that of scientific method. The competence of chess comprises all possible states of gameplay, the competence of a language game is all possible sentences, and the competence of the natural sciences is all possible combinations of symbols (so-called theories and observations). Chess's universe consists of all the combinations that have been played. The language game's universe (that is, the so-called "world") consists of all the sentences that have been thought. The universe of the natural sciences (that is, so-called "nature") is made up of all the theories and observations that have been proposed.

A distinction is to be made between closed and open games. A game is "closed" if its repertoire and structure are fixed; otherwise, it is "open". Chess is a closed game; language games and the natural sciences are open games. Closed games can be opened (if, for example, we added an elephant between the rook and the knight). So long as this does not happen, the competence and universe are the same. At some point (in a few million years) all possible chess moves will have been made. Chess's competence will be exhausted, and the universe of chess will no longer expand. The last synthesis in Hegel (and actually in Marx as well) signifies such competence being exhausted, the universe of the mind fixed in place. But that is an error, because the mind is open. There is no need to open it in order to avoid the last synthesis (paradise). Competence of mind is not necessarily the same the "the world". Mind continues to become more competent and the world continues to expand.

Open games are infinite, but not all-encompassing. An all-encompassing game (a game of games) would have an all-encompassing repertoire and an all-encompassing structure, therefore everything would be an element and everything would be a rule. So rather than having an all-encompassing competence (being all-powerful), the game would be incompetent, because when everything is a rule, everything is permitted. And it would have no all-encompassing universe (cosmos), but rather no universe at all, for it would be chaotic. If the game of games were a concept of God, then God would not be all-powerful, but powerless, and he would not be everywhere, but nowhere. Because there can be no cosmos (for that would be the universe of an impossible game of all games), every open game has its specific competence and its specific universe. For example, language games are competent for a universe that is different from that of painting, even though both games, because they are open, may be infinite.

Open games change their repertoire in two ways: by expansion and reduction. To expand a repertoire means to assimilate new elements. The new elements come from outside the game, although possibly from other games. Such elements, foreign to the game, are "noise" for this game. To expand the repertoire means to assimilate noises. The production of noises in a game is "poetry". Poets expand the repertoire of their game, heighten its competence and augment its universe. Every open game (thinking, natural sciences, painting, music) has a poetry of its own.

To reduce a repertoire is to transform elements into noises. Let this kind of game be "philosophy" or "game criticism". The criteria of philosophy are the elements found in the game that are superfluous (redundant) or destructive (contradictory). Philosophers reduce the repertoire of the game and thereby expand its competence and universe. The relationship between poetry and philosophy is more complex, however. All poetry is philosophical, for the new sounds expose contradictions and

redundancies. And all philosophy is poetic, for the eradication of contradictions and redundancies leads to new noises. In this convoluted area, there is a great deal that the theory of information has yet to do. The competencies of games, although specific, tend to interpenetrate. For example, science is competent for music, or music is competent for mind. There is cannibalistic tendency between games. In these areas of anthropophagous interpenetration it is possible to translate between games. Outside such areas, it is not possible. For in these areas one can set up meta-games that include both of the mutually cannibalistic games (natural sciences and music, for example, or Marxism and Catholicism). And translations have two results: they permit participation in multiple games, and they permit changes in game structures through comparisons with others. There are countless difficulties in this area as well, and contemporary philosophy (as a critique of meta-games) will have to resolve them.

In order to play, the player must accept the repertoire and the structure of the game. He can't play chess if he moves tablespoons instead of the chessmen, or if he takes his opponent's king in the first move. In order to play, a player loses a freedom. If he is playing the game solely to win (if he gives himself over to the game, so to speak), then he is conditioned by the game's repertoire and rules, for he has an unconditional belief in this game. "Belief," then, is the decision to take a game seriously, that is, to reject poetry, philosophy and translation. For a believer, the game is not play, but in earnest (for example chess, science, Buddhism). Should the player get the idea that the game is a game, however, then he is free to change the rules (that is, to translate) or to change the repertoire (that is, to treat it poetically or philosophically). In other words: he can cheat, in which case it must be clear that his deceit is a legitimate feature of a meta-game that he doesn't know is a game. The cheat, too, is then a believer, if in a meta-game. A player playing a game in an awareness that it is a game is not a believer in this game. Rather he is engaged in it.

A human being as "homo ludens" is set apart from animals by the absence of seriousness. Play is his answer to the stolid seriousness of life and death. As a player he resists this stolidity. And he becomes more of a rebel the more games he plays and the more he cheats. He sets himself apart from the apparatuses he deceives in the course of his playing by means of his ability to open games. In other words: he sets himself apart from computers, government regulations and other visible and invisible monsters by means of poetry, philosophy and translation. That is his hope. As a subject of history, he may be liberated by these apparatuses. But history itself is only a game, and he can find others.

Translated by Nancy Roth