



intrinsic

extrinsic

autotelic

end empirical athletes

agent's sport

motivation

motivating

sports

activity

one

goal

professional

actions aspirations

may

conditions

agent

autotelicity

intrinsically

accounts

play

one's

think

satisfaction

given

concept

nature case seems

reasons

playing

value

motivations

account

suits

needs psychological

# Beyond Autotelic Play

Stephen E. Schmid

## Abstract

In the Philosophy of Sport literature, play has been widely conceived, in whole or part, as an autotelic activity; that is, an activity pursued for intrinsic factors.

I examine several versions of the conception of play as an autotelic activity. Given these different accounts, I raise the question whether the concept of autotelic play is tenable. I examine three possibilities: (i) accept the concept of autotelic play and reject the possibility of satisfying the conditions for play activities; (ii) accept the concept and acknowledge that play refers to a range of activities ranging from the purely autotelic to something less; and, (iii) reject the definition of play as an autotelic activity and redefine play. I argue that the third option is the best avenue for constructing a viable account of play.

In defending this third option, I argue that play activities are value laden, that the value of play is an empirical matter, and that the effect of motivating reasons on behavior is the basis for determining which motivating reasons count as intrinsic or extrinsic. I conclude that the weight of the arguments suggest we would be well-served to redefine and move beyond the notion of autotelic play.

## Beyond Autotelic Play

*“No, Sir, not a day’s work in all my life. What I have done I have done because it has been play. If it had been work I shouldn’t have done it.*

*“Who was it who said, ‘Blessed is the man who has found his work?’ Whoever it was he had the same idea in his mind. Mark you, he says his work—not somebody else’s work. The work that is really a man’s own work is play and not work at all. Cursed is the man who has found some other man’s work and cannot lose it. When we talk about the great workers of the world we really mean the great players of the world. The fellows who groan and sweat under the weary load of toil that they bear never can hope to do anything great. How can they when their souls are in a ferment of revolt against the employment of their hands and brains? The product of slavery, intellectual or physical, can never be great.”*

Mark Twain, "A Humorist's Confession," *The New York Times*, 11/26/1905

Here is a common feeling: “I’d give anything to not be at work and out playing.” This sentiment is seen on bumper stickers in messages like, “I’d Rather Be Sailing” or “I’d Rather Be Climbing.” Why are there no bumper stickers with the message, “I’d Rather Be Working”? What is it about play that we find so different from work? The same question can be applied to sports and the playing of sports. Kretchmar (13) captures this dichotomy in relation to sport when he says that in some instances athletes are not playing but working their sport. But, in making such a distinction, especially with respect to sports, one implicitly expresses the view that playing a sport is more appropriate or more valuable than working a sport. It seems there is an evaluative claim tied to our very notion of playing sports. Is playing sport more desirable than “working” sport?<sup>1</sup>

In the Philosophy of Sport literature, play has been widely conceived, in whole or part, as an autotelic activity; that is, an activity pursued for intrinsic factors. As has been argued (22), philosophers have conceived of autotelic play in several ways. In this paper, I consider in greater detail the Intrinsic Reasons account of play activity. After reviewing earlier arguments for other accounts of autotelic play, I consider the question of whether the concept of autotelic play is tenable. I examine three possibilities: (i) accept the concept of autotelic play and reject the

possibility of satisfying the conditions for play activities; (ii) accept the concept and acknowledge that play refers to a range of activities ranging from the purely autotelic to something less; and, (iii) reject the definition of play as an autotelic activity and redefine play.

In defending this third option, I argue that play activities are value laden, that the value of play is an empirical matter, and that the effect of motivating reasons on behavior is the basis for determining which motivating reasons count as intrinsic or extrinsic. I will conclude that the weight of the arguments suggest we would be well-served to redefine play independently of the notion of autotelicity.

### **I. Conceptions of Autotelic Play**

Broadly stated, the philosophical literature defines autotelic play as an activity pursued for factors intrinsic to the activity. Under this conception of play as autotelic activity, the athlete plays his sport when he engages in the activity for some intrinsic aspect of the activity.<sup>2</sup> By implication, to pursue a sporting activity for instrumental or extrinsic factors is to not, strictly speaking, play the sport. Despite its broad acceptance, I find this conception of autotelic play and its justification unsatisfactory. In part, my dissatisfaction with this account of autotelic play is due to the lack of consistency in conceptualizing autotelicity. Often, philosophers who appeal to autotelic activity employ more than one characterization as part of their definition. This is not surprising given both the close relationship of these different conceptions of autotelic play and the lack of clarity in the very notion of intrinsic properties and intrinsic values upon which the notion of autotelic play depends.

A careful reading of the philosophy of sport literature reveals at least three conceptions of autotelic play:

- A) The Metaphysical Account: play is an activity that is an end in itself;
- B) The Intrinsically Valued Account: play is an intrinsically valuable activity; and,
- C) The Intrinsic Reasons Account: play is an activity pursued for intrinsic reasons.<sup>3</sup>

The Metaphysical Account grounds the intrinsicity of autotelic play in some property or properties of the activity which make the activity an end in itself. The grounding of intrinsicity

in this account is independent of the agent's psychological attitudes. The main problem with the Metaphysical Account is that it is not clear how to, or whether one can, descriptively identify that property or properties of the activity which are supposed to be essential to that activity being an end in itself. In the realm of sport, for example, there are no plausible grounds for viewing a particular activity, or group of activities, as an end in itself. If one were to argue that the act of throwing a baseball is an end in itself, then one would be hard pressed to deny that throwing a grenade was not also an end in itself. But, tossing grenades seems like a means to the ends of warfare and not an end in itself. What the Metaphysical Account does not, and I think cannot, provide is a principled account stating why one set of activities is an end in itself in one context and not an end in itself in another context.<sup>4</sup> Most importantly, determining whether an action is an end in itself will require knowing the intentions and/or values of the agent for whom the action is to be an end in itself.

The Intrinsically Valued Account of autotelic play values an activity for its own sake and not as a means to an end. The immediate question arises, what property or properties are intrinsically valuable? If one were to argue that there is some property of the activity that grounds and determines the intrinsic value, then the Intrinsically Valued Account reduces to the Metaphysical Account, at best. At worst, the Intrinsically Valued Account begs the question—play is intrinsically valuable because play's value is found in playful activity. In effect, play is intrinsically valuable because it is an activity pursued in itself, where it is assumed that an enjoyable or fun activity pursued in itself is just intrinsically valuable. On the other hand, if one argues the intrinsic value of play is grounded in an agent's attitudes (for example, the perceived enjoyment or pleasure of the activity), then the activity gains its value from certain psychologically desired states. In this hedonistic version, it is not the activity itself that is intrinsically valuable but the agent's enjoyment or pleasure derived from the activity. However, this hedonistic appeal does not explain why one might find an activity intrinsically valuable in one context and not in another—the same activity may be enjoyed in one context but not another. It seems that at least part of the explanation of how the context affects the agent's valuing of the

activity will depend on the reasons motivating the agent's actions. In fact, it seems hard to understand the value an agent places on his actions apart from or independent of the reasons for that action. The motives and reasons of the agent are fundamental to the agent's valuing an action.

As is clear in the analysis of the first two accounts, the reasons motivating one's actions are fundamental to the concept of autotelic play. Ultimately, both the Metaphysical and the Intrinsically Valuable accounts presuppose motivating reasons in their analysis of play. The third account, Intrinsic Reasons, provides the most plausible explanation of the concept of autotelic play. The Intrinsic Reasons account holds that the intrinsicality of autotelic play is grounded in the agent's psychological attitudes, intentions, and motivations initiating and guiding the relevant actions. Under this account, the types of reasons an agent may possess are either extrinsic or intrinsic. Extrinsic reasons in sports play would include participating in a sport for fame, fortune, or glory. Intrinsic reasons are participating in a sport for the love of the sport. Despite the fact that the Intrinsic Reasons account is fundamental to the Metaphysical and Intrinsically Valuable accounts, there is a crucial question to be answered: What makes intrinsic reasons intrinsic?

## **II. Beyond Autotelic Play**

I think the Intrinsic Reasons account is the best way to think about the concept of play. However, I will argue that we should move beyond the concept of autotelicity in clarifying an Intrinsic Reasons account of play. The following arguments are meant to both argue for this thesis while at the same time addressing concerns about moving beyond autotelic play. In short, I will argue against the first two options (i and ii) offered above.

### *One: Autotelicity is Too Simple a Concept to Capture Play Activities*

As argued in a previous paper (22), conceiving of play as an intentional action leads to conceiving Intrinsic Reasons as having a dual nature. This conclusion arises from both the

philosophical literature on intentional action and psychological studies about motivation. Following the psychological literature, I characterized the dual nature of the reasons involved in play activities as including both a goal motivation and a goal content/aspiration. Goal motivation concerns the reasons an agent participates in an activity—is it for autonomous (for one’s own reasons) or controlled (for reasons that are not one’s own) reasons? As discussed with reference to the psychological theory supporting this claim, goal motivations vary along a continuum from fully controlled to fully autonomous and can change over time based upon social contexts in which the agent acts and the agent’s own internalization of motivating factors. Goal content/aspiration<sup>5</sup> concerns the goals people pursue and whether these goals are satisfying and rewarding on their own, thus directly satisfying basic psychological needs, or whether the goal satisfaction depends on external factors, like rewards, external signs of success, or contingent approval from others. While goal motivation and goal aspiration are closely related, research has shown that these two independently vary with respect to agent psychological well-being (23). The Intrinsic Reasons account, as originally stated, is too simple and inadequate to provide an account of play activities.<sup>6</sup> As I argue in the earlier paper, the failure to distinguish between the three accounts and the failure to clarify the dual nature of Intrinsic Reasons results in confusion around the concept of autotelicity and how autotelic activities are supposed to characterize play activity.

In addition to speaking to the incompleteness of the simple Intrinsic Reasons account, the dual nature of motivating reasons makes it difficult to answer the question about what makes Intrinsic Reasons intrinsic. First, it seems that there are many motivational influences, both intrinsic and extrinsic, and the dual nature of motivating reasons and their interactions makes it difficult to give a clear and viable account of play in actual cases based on the concept of autotelicity. Furthermore, most athletes, like most people, have mixed motivations in many of their actions. For example, consider this scenario: Teri participates in a rock climbing competition because her parents want her to.<sup>7</sup> In this case, Teri’s action has intrinsic goal content (rock climb) and extrinsic goal motivation (parental coercion). If one is inclined to say that Teri

is playing at rock climbing in this scenario, then it seems one must reject the notion of play as an autotelic activity since one of the aspects of her intentional action is extrinsic, which conflicts with the concept of autotelicity as an intrinsic activity. In other words, a person may be acting on a “mixed–motivation” in that there are both intrinsic and extrinsic factors in effect. On top of these mixed–motivations, the degree of intrinsic to extrinsic content of both one’s goal motivation and goal aspiration changes in degree and substance, sometimes even during the same event. For example, a student athlete may have started playing a sport on a particular day excited by the fun of the event only to have his excitement evaporate when his father yells at him from the sideline to “hustle” and “be aggressive.” In this case, one can plausibly argue that the athlete’s motivation has transitioned from intrinsic (play because its fun) to extrinsic (play to make Dad happy). Such variation of motivation along a continuum from intrinsic to extrinsic (and vice versa) can occur within a single sporting event, across many weeks, months, or even years. Given these difficulties, does anyone ever satisfy, at all times, both aspects of the dual nature of play? Must one satisfy both for autotelic play to be tenable? The simple Intrinsic Reasons account cannot answer these questions.

#### *Two: Necessary and Sufficient Conditions Analysis*

Most philosophers arguing for some version of autotelic play have argued that autotelicity is necessary for an activity being play, but not sufficient. Depending on the philosopher, various additional conditions have been suggested. Suits’ analysis of the concept of play is clear about the limits of autotelicity to satisfy both necessary and sufficient conditions (24: p. 119). Suits goes on to provide a definition of play that depends upon a contrast with work as part of the sufficiency condition: “x is playing if and only if x has made a temporary reallocation to autotelic activities of resources primarily committed to instrumental purposes” (24: p. 124). For Suits, it is the reallocation of instrumental resources to autotelic activities that separates work from play and provides a defining feature of the concept of play. So, while autotelicity is necessary for play, it is only when autotelicity is conjoined with the reallocation of



resources that autotelicity is also sufficient for play. And, as Suits continues, the one resource that is universally required for all play activities is time, although others may also be involved.

For several reasons, I find this attempt to add an additional condition, as well as others, unsatisfactory. For brevity, I will limit my analysis to Suits' account, although my general point applies equally well to other attempts to add one or more additional conditions to bolster the concept of autotelic play. First, the sufficiency condition is too strong. Since only those who reallocate instrumental resources to autotelic resources fulfill the conditions of play, this sufficient condition would prohibit professional athletes from every playing. Assuming that a professional athlete could autotelically act when participating in his sport, then for that athlete to play would require that the athlete reallocate resources to that activity. But, it doesn't seem possible for the professional athlete to reallocate resources since the potential play activity (his sport) is his work. Suits' sufficient condition would entail that professional athletes never play their sport, since there is never a reallocation of resources. My counterargument would apply, it seems, just as easily to college athletes and perhaps many high school athletes.<sup>8</sup>

One might respond to my counterargument by claiming that professional athletes never meet the necessary condition for play; that is, professional athletes cannot autotelically participate in their sport because they are paid, or rewarded, for their pursuits. Professional athletes, the rebuttal continues, cannot satisfy the sufficient condition for play because they cannot satisfy the necessary condition first. Regardless of one's feelings about professional athletes, this response stipulates that a certain class of athletes are unable to reallocate resources because they are unable to autotelically play their sport. I doubt there are many who want to argue that professional athletes never (autotelically) play their sport.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, it is not clear that one would be able to limit oneself to professional athletes once this argument was articulated. Many athletes participate in their sport for instrumental reasons ranging from monetary rewards to fitness to companionship. In short, if one does not stipulate that professional athletes never autotelically participate in their sport and one acknowledges that some may play their sport, then Suits' reallocation condition will fail with respect to professional

athletes—they will fail to meet Suits’ sufficiency condition for play even though their actions are autotelic since they cannot reallocate resources (time) from an instrumental to an autotelic activity.

There are two further points about the attempt to use autotelicity in the necessary and sufficient conditions for the concept of play. Curiously, Suits himself raises one of these concerns. In the same paper in which he specifies the sufficient conditions for play, he advances an argument that seems to equally apply to the concept of autotelicity. The question Suits is considering is whether aesthetic and religious activities can be instances of play. Given his definition, to be instances of play aesthetic and religious activities would have to be autotelic activities (necessary condition) and there must be a reallocation of resources (time) from instrumental to autotelic activities (sufficient condition). However, Suits seems to think aesthetic and religious activities are hard-pressed to meet the necessary conditions requirement:

Thus, if a given instance of aesthetic appreciation or religious devotion is *really*...valued because of its usefulness for some further purpose, then it is not *really* autotelic behaviour, and so it does not *really* qualify even as a candidate for the name “play.” Now, I suggest that activities that are very highly valued—which aesthetic and religious pursuits are, by those who value them at all—are very nearly always valued at least in part because they are thought to be, in one way or another, good *for* us, and not solely because they are thought to be good in themselves. (24: pp. 128–129. Suits’ emphasis.)

While this passage speaks to the previous arguments concerning professional athletes, it is interesting that Suits finds it “very hard for us to think of such things as aesthetic appreciation and religious devotion as *purely* autotelic” (24: p. 129). If it is hard to think of these two activities as being instances of play, how much harder is it to think of most games and sports as purely autotelic? In fact, it is exceptionally difficult to find any game or sport activity which involves the intentions of the agent to be separable from “some further purpose.” While Euchre won’t get you to heaven, playing Euchre is fun. Isn’t playing a game because it is “fun” (or because it’s challenging, interesting, enlightening, etc.) a type of “further purpose” which prevents that activity from being purely autotelic and thus not a candidate for play? In addition, don’t most athletes highly value their chosen sport? If so, then according to Suits almost all who do will not meet the conditions of autotelic play. It seems that pretty much any reason for

participating in a game or sport would disqualify that activity from being an instance of play given this further-conditions criterion. If Suits' argument stands, then it seems that participation in games and sports for anything other than random reasons would disqualify that activity as play. In fact, it seems that even the alleged play of a dog would not be purely autotelic since such canine activities play a role in training and establishing social behaviors and, thus, serve "some further purpose." According to Suits' own argument, autotelic activity and, hence, play seems impossible in practice, although conceivably possible. Apparently, play activities are something one can conceive but not something one can achieve.

The logic of Suits' analysis does not augur well for the concept of autotelicity. However, I'll contribute only one more point. In this discussion of the necessary and sufficient conditions requirement for the concept of play, I have been assuming (for sake of argument) that Suits has a coherent concept of autotelicity. However, a careful reading of Suits in this and other essays reveals that his concept of autotelicity confounds the three different accounts I listed above. In some cases, like the one quoted above, Suits says that activities which are ends in themselves (if there really are such things beyond the purely conceptual) are autotelic. At other points, he writes that autotelic activities are intrinsically valuable.<sup>10</sup> And, at other points he talks about the reasons motivating one's participation in sports.<sup>11</sup> As I mentioned above and argued earlier, these three accounts are not conceptually the same and should not be conflated. To conflate them is to render the concept more opaque and detract from the business of defining the concept of play. Suits is not the only philosopher of sport to commit this mistake and my intention is not to single out Suits. My aim is to emphasize the point that if autotelicity is to be a coherent and useful concept for defining, at least in part, the concept of play, then one must be clear about what autotelicity is or means. It does no good to offer an account of the nature of play by appealing to another concept, autotelicity, which is even more opaque because it conflates several different concepts into one. It is not even clear to me that the three versions of autotelicity which I have identified are the only three that have been used in the literature. But, these three are enough to persuade me that it is time to move beyond the concept of autotelic

play.

### *Three: Absolute, Static Conception of Autotelicity*

In my following positive account of Intrinsic Reasons, I will not advocate an absolute, universal, or static account of what counts as intrinsic versus extrinsic. In some cases, the reasons initiating an agent's actions may be extrinsic and result in reports of low satisfaction or well-being. However, in time the agent may discover that the activity is important and valuable and internalize what were once extrinsic motivating factors as one's own. Through this internalization process, the motivating factors that were once responsible for lower reports in agent well-being now have the opposite effect.<sup>12</sup> Maturity, social factors, and the social context in which an action occurs may separately or collectively influence motivating reasons and consequent well-being either positively or negatively. This is one of the reasons a traditional account of autotelicity fails for an Intrinsic Reasons analysis of play. The traditional conception of autotelicity is closely related to the view that intrinsic properties or intrinsic value is foundational, as expressed in the Metaphysical and Intrinsically Valued accounts. To transfer the assumptions about intrinsic properties or values to the Intrinsic Reasons accounts results in analyses where the reasons are supposed to be about the activity itself or about what is supposed to be intrinsically valuable. But, to say the content of one's reasons is supposed to express these assumptions about intrinsic value is one of the problems because these assumptions include some absolute, universal, or static nature of the thing or activity that is responsible for it being intrinsic and not extrinsic. I do not simply mean to say that play is changing, temporary, or episodic, which many philosophers of sport have argued. I mean to focus on the static aspects of intrinsic properties; that whatever is intrinsic must remain unchanged, which is what is supposed to ground autotelicity, or become extrinsic. When this assumption about the static, unchanging nature of intrinsic value is applied to motivating reasons, then intrinsic reasons as unchanging and fixed on some intrinsic features of an activity or intention is contrary to empirical research surrounding agent motivation. Reasons change from intrinsic to extrinsic due to changes in

personal and social contexts, even in sports (17). Similarly, reasons change from extrinsic to effectively intrinsic through a process of internalization. In short, the concept of autotelicity needs to be discarded in the Intrinsic Reasons account because it does not correctly reflect how human motivation works—play does not seem to have this type of static nature.

Another reason the concept of autotelicity should be left behind in the Intrinsic Reasons account is that the concept will result in restricting the content of motivating reasons to those that fit the *a priori* assumptions of intrinsic properties or value. Take for example a case I discussed in an earlier paper. In this case, Bob plays ball to win a college scholarship because playing ball allows him to better himself through education. Bob's reason for playing ball is ultimately to improve himself through his education. According to the traditional conception of autotelicity, this reason is not intrinsic to the sporting activity itself and would not count as a case of autotelic play. However, this reason is considered an intrinsic goal content in the Self-determination Theory psychological literature—Bob is seeking self-improvement and personal growth. Whether one should consider Bob's sporting activity as a case of play may require further examination of the reasons surrounding the sports play as a means of securing an education. The general problem appearing in Bob's case has analogs in many common reasons for participating in sports. Suppose someone says that they compete in running events to get into or stay in shape. Getting or remaining fit is not intrinsic to the activity of running and would not satisfy the traditional demands of autotelicity. In this case, like in Bob's, are we really going to deny that the person who runs to stay in shape is not playing at the sport? The point is that the traditional conception of autotelicity is too narrow a concept for play activities and denies that one can play on purely conceptual grounds without considering facts about the agent and the agent's attitudes and well-being.

To summarize this section, I have argued that autotelicity is an inadequate concept for defining play. This series of arguments speaks to the three options I offered at the top of this essay. In spite of these arguments, one might still be inclined to accept the concept of autotelic play and reject the possibility of satisfying the conditions for play activities (i). This first option

is to treat autotelic play as some ideal toward which we strive but which we are unable to achieve. Taking this stance toward autotelic play is as useful, in my thinking, as taking a similar stance toward indeterminate free will—one cannot achieve it but it is an abstract ideal that shows one what free will would look like. As I argued above, a conceptually rigid definition of autotelic play has the effect of cutting most, if not everyone, off from ever achieving play. I see no compelling reason to posit some unachievable ideal in our sporting endeavors. The second option I offered (ii), accept the concept and acknowledge that play refers to a range of activities ranging from the purely autotelic to something less, fares no better. The concept of autotelicity is not one that admits of degrees. To admit that one's actions are more or less autotelic is to give up on the concept altogether, since things are not more or less intrinsic. Given the failure of autotelicity to provide a conceptually coherent notion of actual play activities, I now turn to the third option: reject the definition of play as an autotelic activity and redefine play.

### **III: What Are Intrinsic Reasons?**

In the last section, I presented three sets of arguments for the inadequacy of autotelicity to serve as the conceptual basis for play. At the same time, I think the Intrinsic Reasons account is the most plausible of the three versions of play, primarily because it focuses on the attitudes of the agent. However, it is incomplete. And, given the arguments of the previous section, then the implicit appeal to autotelicity, that the “intrinsic” of Intrinsic Reasons invokes, creates problems. One solution is to completely redefine play in such a way that there is no appeal to the concepts of intrinsic, autotelic, and related concepts. Hyland (10) made such an attempt at about the same time that Suits published “Words on Play.” In his paper, Hyland argues that play should be understood as an agent's attitude of “responsive openness” to one's environment and actions within any given dynamic context. While it is not my intent to present, discuss, and critique various definitions of play, I mention Hyland because he, like Meier (14), focuses on the attitudes of the agent in his account. However, unlike Meier, Hyland asserts that responsive openness is “more fundamental, than psychological, sociological, or historical accounts of play”

(10: p. 39). While I am not sure that play “achieves such primordiality” as Hyland suggests (10: p. 39.), I think I can make sense of Hyland’s intuition using a modified notion of Intrinsic Reasons.

In providing an account of play, I will attempt to provide an analysis that makes sense of the play/work distinction, captures the salient features of play activities, allows play to include activities outside the context of games and sports, moves beyond the concept of autotelicity, and is empirically grounded.

The key question in providing a more robust and complete Intrinsic Reasons account is to provide a method for determining which reasons are “intrinsic” and which “extrinsic.” I put these in scare quotes because I think the concept of autotelicity with its appeal to intrinsic properties has carried with it a presupposition about that nature of play. The presupposition is that things that are intrinsic or that have intrinsic value are more positively value-laden than those things that are extrinsic. After all, the thing that has its property or value intrinsically does not depend on something extrinsic to it. However, there are no accounts establishing what grounds the intrinsic aspect of play activities independent of the conceptual assumptions about intrinsicity and that it is “better” to be of oneself than derived from something else. Ultimately, as apparent in the Metaphysical and Intrinsically Valued accounts, the presupposition about the superiority of autotelicity depends upon assumptions about the intrinsicity of play activities which themselves cannot be divorced from the agent’s intentions. It seems that if we are to ground the “intrinsic” of Intrinsic Reasons we must appeal to the nature of the intentional agent and the agent’s motivating reasons. I will argue that what elevates play activities above work activities, what makes for Intrinsic Reasons versus Extrinsic Reasons, are the effects of types of motivating reasons on agent well-being and that these effects are discovered through empirical investigation and not conceptual analysis.

The first step toward an account of play is to appeal to what seems the most obvious aspects of play activities. Play activities are thought to be “fun,” “pleasurable,” or “satisfying.” Moreover, play activities have these qualities in abundance over work activities. This common

way of talking about play activities classifies those activities by appeal to psychological effects of those actions. And, assuming that agents act intentionally from motivating reasons, then these activities are classified by appeal to the effects of the reasons for acting. So, giving an Intrinsic Reasons account of play will require discovering the types of reasons that produce the requisite effects. This, in turn, leads one to consider psychological research on agent motivation and behavior and the effects of motivating reasons on agent attitudes. Thus, this method of inquiry leads one to ask, What types of reasons lead to agent well-being and satisfaction? At the same time, we want to know what types of reasons diminish an agent's satisfaction and lead to the inhibition of the behavior. The answers to these question are empirical.

What I suggest in giving an account of play as Intrinsic Reasons is that we start first with the common stance and attitude that accompanies play activities. Then find those motivating reasons that produce that play attitude. In pursuing this strategy, we are starting with a psychological attitude instead of a conceptual analysis. Pursuing the psychological attitude first will require that we make use of the empirical evidence surrounding agent motivation and goal contents. Empirical evidence will look to agent responses when determining what types of agent motivations increase well-being and which do not. This empirical evidence will provide the basis for determining the types of reasons that count as intrinsic (play) and which are extrinsic (work). To this extent, I think that Self-determination Theory (SDT) provides the type of well-researched empirical theory that can provide guidance in such an analysis. In particular, SDT's emphasis upon the role of motivating reasons in conforming to and satisfying basic psychological needs provides a basis for determining which reasons are intrinsic and which extrinsic.

SDT (7, 8) is a theory about people's initiation and maintenance of goal-directed behaviors and is based on the premise that humans naturally coordinate their actions to foster their growth towards a more unified sense of self (autonomy), better understanding of the world around them (competence), and better social integration (relatedness). Unlike other cognitive



theories of motivation, SDT posits these three innate human needs as central to motivation.<sup>13</sup> Humans seek, or have as goals, activities that nurture and satisfy these needs. An immediate consequence of SDT's claim that these innate psychological needs are an essential part of the human psyche is that people will pursue goals, activities, and relationships that tend to support the satisfaction of these psychological needs.

SDT distinguishes between the content of goals or outcomes and the processes regulating behavior. SDT holds that the regulation of behavior varies along a continuum from controlled to autonomous. Controlled behaviors have an external locus of causality (3) and are perceived by the agent as either being demanded by others' expectations or the psychological need to act according to others' expectations, as in the case of guilt (18, 7). Autonomous behaviors have a perceived internal locus of causality (3) and are seen as acted upon volitionally and as a result of one's choice. The second aspect of goal-directed behavior concerns the content of goals or outcomes. Kasser and Ryan (11, 12) distinguished between intrinsic (e.g., personal growth, personal enjoyment) and extrinsic aspirations (e.g., fame, wealth). With both intrinsic/extrinsic goal aspirations and controlled/autonomous regulatory processes, SDT uses the concept of innate psychological needs to explain the differences and changes in an agent's motivations and the growth and well-being different motivations have upon the agent. Assuming that humans are oriented toward growth and the integration of their self in psychic and social connections, the basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness are essential to healthy human functioning. SDT's dual aspects of motivation is consistent with Mele's (15) and Bratman's (1) philosophical accounts of intentional action.<sup>14</sup>

Given SDT's empirical findings, the identification of Intrinsic Reasons can be discovered in the psychological research surrounding motivation. In particular, Intrinsic Reasons will be those reasons, understood in their dual nature, found in the activity's satisfaction of the agent's

innate psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. The “intrinsic” of Intrinsic Reasons has its foundations in basic psychological needs, which differ conceptually and functionally from the conception of autotelicity. Stated another way, what grounds the “intrinsic” of Intrinsic Reasons are the innate psychological needs of the human agent. This is not to say that the content of one’s reasons must include these psychological needs or that all one’s actions must aim to directly satisfy these needs. Rather, it is to acknowledge that certain goal contents of one’s intentions and social contexts framing one’s action either encourage or inhibit the satisfaction of these needs. Finding an activity “fun,” “important,” or “challenging” reveals the satisfaction of these basic needs but it does not entail that the content of the motivating reasons is to satisfy those needs. In research examining the influences of different goal contents and motives on well-being, happiness and self-actualization increase when goals have low extrinsic contents relative to high autonomous motivation and intrinsic goal content. In two different studies, Kasser & Ryan (11, 12) found that emphasizing intrinsic goals was positively connected with several well-being indicators (self-esteem, self-actualization, and the opposite of depression and anxiety). Conversely, placing strong relative importance on extrinsic goals was negatively associated with these well-being indicators. As Ryan *et al.* (21) emphasize, similar results to these have been found across more than a dozen different cultures with working adults and college students.

Just as an important characteristic of play activities is the presence of psychological attitudes expressed as “fun,” “enjoyable,” and “satisfying” (to name a few), so too the SDT research demonstrates that certain goal motivations and aspirations produce the same responses. There is good justification to see these two as describing the same type of attitude. So, my argument is that one can use the empirical research to inform one’s decisions about which reasons count as intrinsic and which extrinsic when conceiving play as Intrinsic Reasons.<sup>15</sup>

To aid in visualizing how this Intrinsic Reasons account works, Figure 1 divides reasons into play or work and the conceptual framework for determining intrinsic versus extrinsic reasons. Figure 2 provides samples of the reason for each of the play and work columns, using

examples from playing or working sports activities. In Figure 2, I've also maintained the column distinctions in the third, fourth and fifth rows to clarify the dual nature of Intrinsic and Extrinsic Reasons.

Play		Work	
Intrinsic Reasons		Extrinsic Reasons	
Autonomous Goal Motivation	Intrinsic Goal Aspirations	Controlled Goal Motivation	Extrinsic Goal Aspirations
Perceived internal locus of causality arising from (i) innate impulses or (ii) internalization of external factors	Aspirations for personal growth, challenge, affiliation, social contribution	Perceived external locus of causality arising from factors external to the agent	Aspirations for wealth, fame, image
Leads to greater well-being and self-regulation and maintenance of behaviors		Leads to less well-being and inhibits self-regulation and maintenance of behaviors	

Figure 1<sup>6</sup>

Play		Work	
Intrinsic Reasons		Extrinsic Reasons	
Autonomous Goal Motivation	Intrinsic Goal Aspirations	Controlled Goal Motivation	Extrinsic Goal Aspirations
Keri participates in a rock climbing competition...	because she enjoys the physical challenge.	Rob pursues his sport to win a college scholarship...	because he wants to be a famous athlete.
Sean loves playing basketball...	because it is so much fun.	Gabriela participates in tedious gymnastics events...	because she wants to make her parents happy.
Averie practices day and night...	because being part of the team is fulfilling.	Ethan shows up for baseball practice...	because he doesn't want the team to think

			he's a slacker.
--	--	--	-----------------

Figure 2

In the Figure 2 examples, Keri, Sean, and Averie are playing because they are acting on Intrinsic Reasons; they are acting autonomously and their goal aspirations are intrinsic, meaning the reasons are ones that are likely to satisfy their basic psychological needs. Conversely, Rob, Gabriela, and Ethan are working because they are acting on Extrinsic Reasons; they are acting in response to external factors and for goal aspirations which are less likely to support their basic psychological needs. As a result, they are less likely to derive satisfaction from their actions and less likely to persist in that behavior.

This analysis captures some of the common contrasts between play and work. Work is often seen as an activity that one has to do, that one would prefer not to do if it were not for the need to earn an income, and that is not satisfying independent from the benefits it produces. In other words, Extrinsic Reasons, as proposed here and as similarly discussed in the SDT literature, are seen as controlling influences on one's behavior that tend to produce lower feelings of satisfaction and well-being than its opposite. Intrinsic Reasons do capture many of the common attitudes towards play—it is a voluntarily pursued, satisfying activity that one would continue to pursue, all things being equal. Being in the “zone” and losing oneself in a sporting activity is part of the attitude that arises when one's capacities and skills are appropriately challenged. Facing and matching an athletic challenge is satisfying in that it is an expression and display of one's competency.<sup>17</sup>

There are several points to acknowledge and clarify in this picture of Intrinsic Reasons. First, the examples of play and work in Figure 2 are ones I have tried to construct that are clearly Intrinsic or Extrinsic in both their goal motivations and goal aspirations. While there are certainly instances where goal motivation and goal aspirations agree in terms of both being intrinsic or extrinsic, it is probably the case that there are mixed motivations at play in the initiation of many of our actions. As I mentioned earlier in this essay, mixed motivations arise from the dual nature of intentional action in the Intrinsic Reasons account. Also, I mentioned

that one's reasons for acting may change in the course of an event and there may be many reasons motivating one's actions. Whereas the autotelic conception of play would require that one dismiss any case of mixed motivations as non-play, I do not think this is justified. Rather, I think there is reason to see the concepts of play and work in their purest forms as extremes along a continuum, similar to the empirically justified continuum between SDT's intrinsic motivation and amotivation. Cases in which an agent has mixed motivations do not rule out the possibility that the agent is playing. Instead, we might call this agent's actions play activities in certain contexts and not in others. What contexts? We would be inclined to call that person's behavior play when he perceives himself as acting autonomously (to a greater degree than not) *and* when his goal aspirations are those that tend to produce more satisfaction and well-being than not. Admittedly, this is vague. But, given the empirical literature, I think play is a vague concept. What will count as play for one person, what actions will contribute to one's well-being, and what will stand opposed to one's conception of work is not something that has a precise definition. The proposal to conceive of play as an autotelic activity was an unsuccessful attempt to provide such precision.

Perhaps returning to an earlier case will strengthen my point here. Recall Bob. Bob was playing ball to get a scholarship because he wanted to improve himself through education. As I stated, Bob's case would not be an instance of play if autotelicity were the foundation of one's conception of play. But, improving oneself through education is an intrinsic goal aspiration, according to the SDT literature. Assuming Bob is acting autonomously, then can we deny, purely on conceptual grounds, that Bob is not playing ball, but instead working his sport? I do not think we can, given the failing of the concept autotelicity. On the other hand, given the emphasis on the value of playing sports, one might argue that Bob's motivating reasons are capable of producing the type of satisfaction which is ideally praised as the value of sports. Whether Bob's case is an instance of play is ultimately an empirical question and not one that can be answered on purely conceptual grounds.

This way of thinking about Intrinsic Reasons is probabilistic in that given the empirical

research on the degrees of autonomous versus controlled influences on behaviors and the goal aspirations' effects on actions, there is no absolute standard or criteria for what constitutes play activities. The degree of autonomy and internalization of motivating factors and the social contexts influencing the attitudes of the agent concerning the agent's goal contents will vary in degree across time for any one agent and across agents. So, this version of Intrinsic Reasons allows one to make a claim about what reasons are *likely* to constitute and lead to play activities, but we cannot absolutely verify in any one instance that a specific set of reasons will necessarily produce an attitude of play in an agent, even though that set of reasons has done so in the past.

To address a final point in my analysis of play as Intrinsic Reasons, while the examples in Figure 2 are instances of sports play, the Intrinsic Reasons account of play is not limited to sports or games contexts. Play activities can occur in any domain, even those one might typically call a work environment. There are those, like Mark Twain relates in the epigraph, whose "work" is play. While it may be easier to play a sport or game, playing in one's work environment is possible. Of course, if like Twain one is playing in one's work environment, it really isn't a *work* environment. The Intrinsic Reasons account holds that what constitutes play activities are the correct set of motivating reasons and these reasons can be had in sport and non-sport contexts. Of course, the factors which can diminish one's play attitude appear in both work and sport contexts. While rewards and monetary compensation are obvious extrinsic factors motivating athletes and non-athletes alike (5), there are social contexts which are less obvious. Controlling parents, coaches, or bosses can affect the agent's motivation by establishing a controlling atmosphere in which an activity is pursued (20). The expectations of fans or customers upon the agent, the agent's desire to satisfy fans/customers, and the competitive atmosphere may all negatively influence the Intrinsic Reasons of the agent (17, 16). These factors and many more influence the personal contexts of the player and diminish the play attitude by creating an environment in which the person feels his behavior is less self-determined. An agent who perceives one's actions as influenced by nonself-determined factors does not perceive oneself as intrinsically motivated and will express less satisfaction and well-

being from those activities when compared to activities in which one perceives oneself as intrinsically motivated. The Intrinsic Reasons account is meant to give an account of play activities that is not limited to sports or games contexts. One can play in most any context.

#### **IV: Conclusion**

I have argued for moving beyond autotelic play. The concept has been characterized in various ways with most accounts blending these different versions into a conceptually incoherent account of play. When examined, autotelicity cannot admit of degrees and there are no extant arguments for why we should accept an unobtainable ideal which the concept entails. In the previous section, I offer a new account of play based on the Intrinsic Reasons account but without the conceptual appeal to intrinsicality which autotelicity entails. Instead, I argue that we should ground the “intrinsic” of Intrinsic Reasons in the innate psychological needs of the human agent. What reasons count as “intrinsic” will ultimately be an empirical matter determined by the effects of those reasons on the agent’s behaviors and participatory satisfaction. With an empirically grounded list of these motivating reasons, one will be able to say what reasons are likely to comprise and lead to play activities.

## REFERENCES

1. Bratman, M. (1987). *Intentions, Plans and Practical Reason*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
2. Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1990). *Flow: The psychology of optimal experience*. New York: Harper Perennial.
3. deCharms, R. (1968). *Personal Causation: The internal affective determinants of behavior*. New York: Academic Press.
4. Deci, E. L. (1975). *Intrinsic Motivation*. New York: Plenum.
5. Deci, E. L., Koestner, R. & Ryan, R. M. (1999). "A meta-analytic review of experiments examining the effects of extrinsic rewards on intrinsic motivation." *Psychological Bulletin*, 125 (6), 627–668).
6. Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (1980). "The empirical exploration of intrinsic motivational processes." In L. Berkowitz (Ed.), *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, 13, 39–80. New York: Academic.
7. Deci, E. L. & Ryan, R. M. (1985). *Intrinsic Motivation and Self-determination in Human Behavior*. New York: Plenum.
8. Deci, E. L. & Ryan, R. M. (2000). "The 'What' and 'Why' of Goal Pursuits: Human needs and the self-determination of behavior." *Psychological Inquiry*, 11(4), 227–268.
9. Deci, E. L. & Vansteenkiste, M. (2004). "Self-Determination Theory and Basic Need Satisfaction: Understanding human development in Positive Psychology." *Ricerche di Psicologia*, 1(27), 23–40.
10. Hyland, D. A. (1977). "And That Is the Best Part of Us: Human being and play." *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport*, Vol. 4: 36–49.
11. Kasser, T. & Ryan, R. M. (1993). "A Dark Side of the American Dream: Correlates of financial success as a central life aspiration." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 65, 410–422.
12. Kasser, T. & Ryan, R. M. (1996). "Further Examining the American Dream: Differential correlates of intrinsic and extrinsic goals." *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 22, 280–287.
13. Kretchmar, S. (1973). "Ontological possibilities: Sport as play. In *The Philosophy of Sport*, Robert G. Osterhoudt (ed.), Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas, 64–78.
14. Meier, K. V. (1988). "Triad trickery: Playing with sport and games." *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport*, 15: 11–30.
15. Mele, A. (1992). *Springs of Action*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
16. Pelletier, L. G., Fortier, M. S., Vallerand, R. J., Tuson, K. M., Brière, N. M., & Blais, M. R.



- (1995). "Toward a new measure of intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation, and amotivation in sports: The Sport Motivation Scale (SMS)." *Journal of Sport & Exercise Psychology*, 17, 35–53.
17. Reeve, J. & Deci, E. L. (1996). "Elements of the competitive situation that affect intrinsic motivation." *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 22(1), 24–33.
  18. Ryan, R. M. (1982). "Control and Information in the Intrapersonal Sphere: An extension of cognitive evaluation theory." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 57, 749–761.
  19. Ryan, R. M. (1995). "Psychological Needs and the Facilitation of Integrative Processes." *Journal of Personality*, 63(3), 397–427.
  20. Ryan, R. M., Connell, J. P., & Grolnick, W. S. (1990). "When achievement is not intrinsically motivated: A theory of self-regulation in school." In A. K. Boggiano & T. S. Pittman (eds.), *Achievement and Motivation: A Social-development Perspective*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
  21. Ryan, R. M., Huta, V., & Deci, E. L. (2008). "Living Well: A self-determination theory perspective on eudaimonia." *Journal of Happiness Studies* 9, 139–170.
  22. Schmid, S. E. (2009). "Reconsidering Autotelic Play." *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport*, Vol. 36: 238–257.
  23. Sheldon, K. M., Ryan, R. M., Deci, E. L., & Kasser, T. (2004). "The Independent Effects of Goal Contents and Motives on Well-Being: It's both what you pursue and why you pursue it." *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 30(4), 475–486.
  24. Suits, B. (1977). "Words on Play." *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport*, Vol. 4: 117–31.
  25. Vallerand, R. J., Deci, E. L. & Ryan, R. M. (1987). "Intrinsic motivation in sport." *Exercise and Sport Sciences Reviews*, 15, 389–425.

---

<sup>1</sup> Throughout this paper, I will use "play" in its technical sense. Often, I will use "autotelic play" when I intend to designate that specific conception of play. Later in the paper, "play" will be used to express the Intrinsic Reasons conception. I will use terms like "participate," "engage," etc. to neutrally describe relevant activities for which it is indeterminate what conception of play is operative.

<sup>2</sup> For ease, I will consider the playing of sports in this paper. While I am restricting my discussion to sports, I think the application of autotelic play also applies to games, as well as other activities. Following Meier (14), I will consider sports to be a subset of games in which there is demonstration of physical skill in a goal-directed activity governed by accepted rules which place restrictions upon the achievement of the activity's goal. What is important about the conceptions of sports/games and play is that one can play with or without regard to a sport/game.

<sup>3</sup> A full discussion of these accounts and the conclusions of this section can be found in "Reconsidering Autotelic Play" (22).

<sup>4</sup> One might object that in certain contexts, one can say certain activities are ends in themselves. These activities are those that occur within the context of sports/games where the rules limit the available options and in some cases specify what actions/activities must be used. Thus, within sports/games contexts there may be an explanation for why these activities are ends in themselves; it's because the games themselves are. I think this rebuttal fails for a couple of reasons. First, if one admits, as does Kretchmar (13) and many others, that one can *work* one's sport (in opposition to playing it), then the rule-limited activities are not sufficient for those activities being ends in themselves since they readily admit of work and not just play. Second, even if one allows (which I do not) that

---

sporting/gaming contexts may explain why one set of activities are ends in themselves, this still will not provide a principled account stating why one set of play activities is an end in itself for the simple reason that the sporting/gaming context would then apply only to a sporting/gaming context. But, play activities do and can occur outside of sports and game contexts. So, there would be no principled account of *play* activities, only the *playing of games/sports* under this proposal. My intent is to provide a single, consistent account of play and one that neither conflates play with games/sports nor makes room for a multifaceted definition of play. My thanks to an anonymous referee for raising this point and allowing this clarification.

<sup>5</sup> In my earlier paper, I used “goal content” to talk about this second aspect of motivating reasons. I will use both “goal aspiration” and “goal content” to refer to the same thing depending on context. I prefer “aspiration” because it connotes a desired goal as part of the content.

<sup>6</sup> Meier’s (14) is one of the most explicit proposals of an intrinsic reasons account.

<sup>7</sup> To borrow an example from (22).

<sup>8</sup> And, my point would apply to Mark Twain and his claim that he has never worked a day in his life—he’s only played.

<sup>9</sup> It is not clear that Suits would make the claim that professional athletes never play. In the context of a stalemated tennis match and aesthetic and religious pursuits, Suits states that for an activity to be a candidate for play activity, “[t]he only requirement is that the activity at issue be capable of being pursued as an end in itself” (24: p. 128). Certainly, the activity of the professional athlete is “capable” of being pursued as an end in itself. However, as I will discuss in the next paragraph, Suits doesn’t really seem serious about this point.

<sup>10</sup> For example: “But when there has been more than enough time for those pursuits, time has been temporarily allocated to intrinsically valued pursuits, such as gambling on the greensward” (24: p. 125).

<sup>11</sup> In the context of the stalemate tennis match, the fourth player comments: “I understand why each of you is willing to continue, but none of your reasons applies to me.... This month has been a temporary reallocation of my time, and I must now return that resource to its primary allocation. Unlike the rest of you, I’ve been at play.” (24: p. 128).

<sup>12</sup> The process of internalizing external social influences and norms (19) is a central aspect of the continuum model of motivation in Self-determination Theory (7), which I will discuss in more detail in the next section.

<sup>13</sup> SDT’s claims about these innate psychological needs are a result of inductive and deductive inferences during the examination of human motivation (6, 8). Many of these needs have been examined in greater detail and are of increasing interest in SDT and Positive Psychology (9).

<sup>14</sup> This point was argued extensively in (22).

<sup>15</sup> One might argue that the sketch I just provided is consistent with Hyland’s (10) “primordial” account of play as responsive openness. Hyland’s notion of responsive openness, on my reading, is a broad and opaque way of describing a set of motivating reasons. However, the account I wish to suggest captures Hyland’s main claim that play activities speak to or satisfy some deep-seated psychological needs. These needs and the reasons that support these needs and agent well-being are not mysterious but discoverable through empirical investigation.

<sup>16</sup> The items listed in the Intrinsic and Extrinsic Goal Aspirations columns is a very short list intended only to provide general examples of each. A more detailed list of specific goal aspirations can be compiled. Whether a specific goal aspiration is intrinsic or extrinsic, especially in borderline cases, will depend upon its effect on agent well-being will vary between agents and contexts.

<sup>17</sup> The idea of optimal challenge is championed by Csikszentmihalyi (2) in his theory of flow experiences. Interestingly, Csikszentmihalyi called these flow experiences autotelic activities (which may be a fourth way of conceiving of autotelicity). Deci (4) and Deci & Ryan (6, 8) have argued that the role of competency in optimal challenges is consistent with competency in SDT.