Reconsidering Autotelic Play

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Common Assumptions about Playing of Sports or Games

- Assumptions:
  - Playing for the love of a sport is more valuable than playing to earn millions
  - Playing to master a skill is more laudable than playing to win fans' adoration
  - Playing a sport is not about reaping the rewards of fame and fortune but about some factors intrinsic to the sporting activity
  - The assumption is that play has intrinsic features that separates it from work or other activities
Questions

- Why is play more valuable than work?
- Why is an activity pursued for intrinsic reasons more valuable or laudable than an activity pursued for extrinsic reasons?
- Why can't the pursuit of fame and fortune be just as significant a reason for playing a sport as the pursuit of an activity for its own sake?
- What justification can one give for play as an intrinsic activity instead of play as an extrinsic activity?

Which Cases are Instances of Play?

Case 1: Rob plays ball to win a college scholarship because he wants to be a famous ball player

Case 2: Bob plays ball to win a college scholarship because he wants to pay for college and better himself through education

Case 3: Teri participates in a fun rock climbing competition because her parents want her to

Case 4: Keri participates in a fun rock climbing competition because she enjoys the physical challenge
Play as Autotelic Activity

- **Autotelic Play**: the position that play activities are ones which are pursued for factors intrinsic to the activity
- Autotelicity usually contrasts with instrumental, extrinsic, or work activities
- Depending on the philosopher, autotelicity has been seen either as necessary and sufficient (Meier) or just necessary for play (Suits, Feezell, Huizinga)

Three Conceptions of Autotelicity

- Suits (1977): play activities are those “activities which are ends in themselves”
  - “x is playing if and only if x has made a temporary reallocation to autotelic activities of resources primarily committed to instrumental purposes”
- Feezell (2004): Play is (i) voluntary, it is (ii) separate from ordinary life, and it is (iii) autotelic
  - "It is autotelic, intrinsically valued, not instrumentally desired. Play is engaged in for the sake of the intrinsic enjoyment of play itself. One might see the play of sport as a free and immensely enjoyable physical activity engaged in for its own sake."
- Meier (1988): "an activity voluntarily pursued for predominantly intrinsic reasons"
Inadequacy of Conceptions of Autotelicy

• Play activities are
  1. ends–in–themselves
  2. intrinsically valued (by the agent)
  3. pursued for intrinsic reasons

• These conceptions of play as autotelic activity are at best incomplete and at worst inadequate conceptions of play

1. Autotelicity as Ends–in–Themselves

1. If autotelic play activities are mental or physical activities which are ends–in–themselves, then there is some property of that activity which is the bearer of intrinsic value or an end–in–itself.

2. Within the context of games and sports, there is no property of that activity which is the bearer of intrinsic value or an end–in–itself.

• Example: The physical act of throwing may be an end in-itself only given certain assumptions about the context in which the event occurs. Within the context of sports, the particular action of throwing a baseball, when it is to strike out a batter, is a means to an end.

• Beardsley (1965): what is an end in one case may be a means in another case

3. Therefore, it is not the case that autotelic play activities are mental or physical activities which are ends–in–themselves.
2. Autotelic as Intrinsically Valuable

- Autotelic play activities are intrinsically valued actions of the agent.

- This version can be seen as either justifying play or providing a conception of play:

  1. Justification is Circular: Play is intrinsically valued because it is intrinsic action. But, without the identification of a property with intrinsiscness, intrinsic action is just intrinsically valuable action.

  2. Conception is Derivative on Reasons/Motives: One and the same action may be intrinsically valuable in one situation and instrumentally valuable in another. What characterizes the context in which an action is intrinsically valuable or instrumentally valuable will depend on the motivations of the agent. At best, autotelicy as intrinsically valued action is incomplete.

3. Autotelic as Intrinsic Reasons (Motives)

- The appeal to an agent’s reasons or motives is fundamental when determining whether an action is pursued for its own sake or for instrumental reasons

  - It seems hard to place value on an agent’s actions apart from or independent of the motivations for that action

  - If one pursues an action for intrinsic reasons, then one’s actions are intrinsically valuable because one is motivated to pursue the action purely for reasons related to the activity itself.

- Problem: There seem to be two aspects to intrinsic reasons or motives and Meier's account is insensitive to this
Autotelicity and Intrinsic Motivation

- I suggest that we see Meier's rough conception of play as an empirical thesis about the motivation of agents

- Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan) concerns itself with two aspects of human motivation
  - Regulation of human behavior: intrinsic/extrinsic motivation
  - Content of human behavior: intrinsic/extrinsic goal content
  - Intrinsic motivation and goals are conceptually related and correlated, but each has independent influence on psychological well-being

Intrinsic/Extrinsic Motivation

- SDT research focuses on the perceived forces in the initiation and maintenance of agent behavior and the consequences for learning, performance, personal experience, and well-being

  - Intrinsic motivation is understood as the satisfaction associated with an activity alone and not with separable consequences
    - The needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness are understood to be the energizing needs for intrinsically motivated behaviors
  
  - Extrinsically motivated behaviors are those influenced by factors external to the activity being pursued
Degrees of Autonomy and Needs

- The degree to which a person is intrinsically motivated is a continuum from completely intrinsically motivated to completely extrinsically motivated.
- Contexts which increase perceived autonomy, competence, and relatedness increase intrinsic motivation and well-being.
  - Examples: choice among interesting alternatives, acknowledging people’s feelings, positive feedback.
- Similarly, contexts which decreased perceived autonomy and competence undermine intrinsic motivation and well-being.

Intrinsic Goals

- Intrinsic goals concern the content of an agent's personal goals.
  - Intrinsic goal contents are inwardly oriented toward personal growth, personal challenge, and connection to others.
  - In contrast, extrinsic goal contents are outwardly oriented toward money, success, and popularity.
  - Intrinsic goals tend to correlate with intrinsic motivation (Sheldon & Kasser, 1995) but each predicts independent variance in psychological well-being (Sheldon et al., 2004).
Cases Revisited

• Case 1: Rob plays ball to win a college scholarship (extrinsic goal) because he wants to be a famous ball player (extrinsic motivation)

• Case 2: Bob plays ball to win a college scholarship (extrinsic goal) because he wants to pay for college and better himself through education (intrinsic motivation)

• Case 3: Teri participates in a fun rock climbing competition (intrinsic goal) because her parents want her to (extrinsic motivation)

• Case 4: Keri participates in a fun rock climbing competition (intrinsic goal) because she enjoys the physical challenge (intrinsic motivation)

Which Case is Play?

• If we follow my suggestion of autotelic play as activities pursued for both intrinsic goals and motives, then we might describe some of the cases as play and others not

  • Case 1: Rob is not playing: Rob's goals are not directed toward the sport but toward what the sport can do for him

  • Case 2: Like Rob. Bob's goals are not directed toward the sport but toward what the sport can do for him even though he is intrinsically motivated to better himself. But, Bob could be seen as playing if it were the case that his goals and motivations were appropriately internalized as his own.

  • Case 3: Teri is not playing: the external influence of her parents saying what she should do undermines her having fun.

  • Case 4: Keri is playing: Terry is intrinsically motivated and has intrinsic goals.
Summary of My Main Points

1. As presented in the literature, the conception of play as autotelic activity is an incomplete conception of play and is inadequate to justify play.

2. Concept of autotelic play needs to include both (i) the factors initiating and maintaining play activity and (ii) the content of the reasons one plays.

3. The SDT research on motivation reveals the need to understand human agency as an expression of three innate psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness.

Justifying Play

- Why is pursuing a sport for intrinsic reasons more valuable than pursuing it for external reasons?

- Why do we assume that playing to master a skill is more laudable than playing to win fans' adoration?

- If we accept that the psychological research on SDT has application and relevance to the concept of autotelic play, then the importance, value, and justification for play activities can be found in the activity’s expression of the agent’s innate psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness.
Well-Being and Intrinsic Motivation and Goals

- Attitudes of the agent and social contexts which support autotelic play are good for the well-being of the agent.

- 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 and high autonomous motivation.

- Agents with the highest well-being responses are those who pursue intrinsic goals for autonomous (rather than controlled) reasons.

- Given inferences made from this research, justification for autotelic play is grounded in the psychological well-being of the agent--play behavior makes the player happier, more fulfilled, and more self-actualized.

Ramifications

- Given the model of degrees of intrinsic motivation, we might be inclined to count some appropriately internalized, extrinsically motivated actions as play.

- Factors which undermine intrinsic motivation and goals are detrimental to play and the agent’s well-being.

- Some factors undermining play will include money, rewards, guilt, shame, fans, coaches, parents or any other factors seen as controlling or undermining competence and relatedness.

- Given variable social contexts and agent attitudes, an athlete will not always be playing, strictly speaking.

- This empirical evidence has ethical ramifications on sports and the well-being of athletes in organized sports.
Criticisms

1. The appeal to the psychological research surrounding SDT has nothing new to offer to the philosophical conception of play

   • Philosopher’s conception of play as autotelicity is not \textit{a priori} – it is an empirical thesis

   • To the extent that autotelic play and SDT are describing the same behaviors, then SDT and the supporting research has much to offer

   • The psychological research shows a need to draw the distinction between goal motives and goal contents, and thus does contribute to the debate

   • Failure to acknowledge this research only hurts our philosophical and ethical discussions of play, sports, and games

Criticisms

2. Autotelic play and SDT are not talking about the same behaviors

   • There is research linking SDT and the playing of sports and participation in exercise.

3. There’s no difference between goal contents and goal motivations

   • Research by Sheldon et al. (2004) shows that goal motives and goal contents independently affect agent well-being

   • This is a distinction that is missing from the philosophical conception of autotelic play