

VOEGELIN AND HUIZINGA ON PLAY AND POLITICAL THEORY

Copyright 2005 William Thompson-Uberuaga

1. Goal: how H's *Homo ludens* advances our appropriation of V's project, more than a technical study of how H's work shows up here and there in V's writings; we are certainly not interested in a "topical" discussion of H or play ♦ we want to advance our understanding of political existence.
2. To this end, central would be the reference to "play" in the introduction of OH, 1: play is treated in the context of the theme of participation in the mystery of the primordial community of being; play seems to help V elucidate certain features of participation, if we follow the indications here in the introduction; **we can speak of the ludic dimension of participation as a key aspect of V's introduction to his magnum opus OH itself:**
 - 2.1. V speaks of the "fullness" of the quality of participation ♦ play somehow keeps us attentive to this, helping us avoid facile explanations and reductionisms.
 - 2.2. V especially emphasizes participations's "disturbing" and "paradoxical" qualities: we are in its midst, we cannot gain a dominating vantage point; we are somewhat uncomfortably caught up within a mystery of being which is much larger than ourselves; such knowledge as might be forthcoming will come from committed participation from within ♦ Further, participation is not just one among many of the things which we do or can do; it is our existence itself.
 - 2.3. Play is a metaphor V turns to in order to elucidate aspects of this participation: Each of us "is an actor, playing a part in the drama of being, and, through the brute fact of ♦ existence, committed to play it without knowing what it is ♦ The role of existence must be played in uncertainty of its meaning, as an adventure of decision on the edge of freedom and necessity" (39-40). We are in a larger play, and like actors, we must strive to play our parts, if the drama that we are in is to occur and occur well, etc. **PLAY THEN BRINGS OUT THE ELEMENT OF COMMITTED PARTICIPATION WITHIN A LARGER PLAY/DRAMA.** Being within the play heightens the elements of the unknown, and yet the need to proceed ♦ hence the disturbing and paradoxical quality of it all.
 - 2.4. V does refer to play as a metaphor to be used (40), but he seems to mean (?) more than that the phenomenon of participation has features akin to those of play; rather, participation itself is, albeit not only, ludic. Being is not just like a drama; it is a drama. We are not simply like actors; we are actors. Some might wish to contest this interpretation of V.
 - 2.5. V notes that we must use the metaphor of play cautiously; here he seems to mean we do not have a script giving us clear objects out there to control; he writes that

participation should not be assimilated to a concept denoting objects; play is "justified, and perhaps even necessary": "it conveys the insight that ♠ participation in being is not blind but illuminated by consciousness" (40). Play implies and presupposes consciousness, creativity, imagination, even freedom, we might say, interpreting V. But the caution is necessary, for "the decisive core of existence" is unknown. V is an emphatically (although not solely) apophatic thinker: "Both the play and the role are unknown" (40).

- 2.6. V here uses the language of "essential ignorance," distinguishing that from the "considerable knowledge" which we do seem to gain through our explorations of the mystery of being; most importantly here is the insight into features of its lastingness, its partial revelations, the "silent voices of conscience and grace♠" (43). V refers to "the greater play of the divine being that enters passing existence in order to redeem precarious being for eternity" as part of this considerable knowledge (43), along with a renewed appreciation for "the free, imaginative play with a plurality of symbols" of being's drama, at least on the part of the later Plato of the *Laws* as he grows in attunement to the complexities of this drama, having passed through a rather less tolerant phase.
3. Much of this sounds like Voegelin's Plato, and indeed it is, and it is within the context of V's treatment of Plato that we again come upon the theme of play, and here we meet (briefly) Huizinga's *Homo ludens* for the first and only time within OH, and so far as I can tell, anywhere else in V's published writings so far, except for his important 1948 review of *Homo ludens*. (CW 13: 160-68). The reference to Huizinga in the context of Plato is not too surprising, since H is greatly influenced by Plato, something V noted too in his review of *Homo ludens*.

I suppose that this section of OH 3 (311-12) was written prior to OH I, and therefore prior to the comments upon play within the introduction to the entire series of OH, based upon materials V had written for his "History of Political Ideas." If that be the case, then the introduction itself would actually reflect the influence of Plato and to a lesser extent of Huizinga.

- 3.1. V writes that play is the "all pervasive category" of the *Laws*: he notes the themes of God's play, our human response to the divine pull as our part in the play, the dialogue form itself as a play (V notes the playful role of drinking here), and V especially dwells upon the interplay between paidia (play) and paideia (education), the misuse of play by the sophists as against the serious play advocated by Plato, and the echoes of the loss of serious play in "contemporary attempts at totalitarian control of the cultural sphere [which] are no more than the systematic perfection of the ochlocratic tyranny that develops in the ♠free' societies in their late phase of disintegration" (315).
- 3.2. Here H is respectfully characterized as casting "some light" on these themes, chiefly through a citation of one paragraph from *Homo ludens*: In play we recognize the spirit. For play is not matter ♠ whatever its essence may be. Even in the animal

world it breaks through the limits of mere physical existence. If we consider it in the perspective of a world determined by forces and their effects, it is a *superabundans* in the full meaning of the word, something that is superfluous. Only through the influx of the spirit, which abolishes absolute determination, does the phenomenon of play become possible, thinkable, and intelligible. The existence of play confirms again and again the superlogical character of our situation in the cosmos. Animals can play, hence they are more than mechanical things. We play and know that we play, hence we are more than merely reasonable beings, for play is unreasonable. [Voegelin appears to be translating from the 1944 German edition; see 3-4 of the English edition, *Homo ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955), for Huizinga's own translation apparently; where V reads "spirit," H reads "mind"; rather than "unreasonable," H uses "irrational." In his review, V characterized *Homo ludens* as "one of rare great works that advances substantially our understanding of man in historical and political existence."]

- 3.3. V glosses H: the "overflow" of play is a quality of transcendence, by virtue of which it can become a vehicle of cultural growth; V especially notes its presence in archaic rites, liturgical dramas, the symbolism of dogma, sports, entertainment, religious serious play, Plato's freedom toward the myth, and the "free acceptance of constitutional provisions for serious observance" (312). H even ends this short but rich section with a story about Plato's own final playfulness: "Plato died at the age of eighty-one. On the evening of his death he had a Thracian girl play the flute to him. The girl could not find the beat of the nomos. With a movement of his finger, Plato indicated to her the Measure" (322).
- 3.4. Note that V considers play under the rubric of transcendence (the *superabundans*); it is not identical with transcendence, but one form which transcendence takes. In his review of H, V had opined that H blended these. (Inasmuch as H views play as a dimension of spirit, this would not seem an accurate critique.) By distinguishing them into genus (transcendence) and species (one of which is play), V argues that we can note a certain superabundance not only among humans and animals (as H argued), but throughout the cosmos. The continuity between cosmic superabundance and human transcendence is the foundation for the analogue between human society and cosmic order found in the cosmological symbolisms/myths of early societies on a global, ecumenic scale. (In his review of H, V notes the Sinic examples of the play-element, even suggesting that this goes along with Toynbee's approach to civilizational history.)

(Examples offered by V of this continuity: form and rhythm, colors and shapes on the organic level as analogous to moral and aesthetic values on the human level. Barry Cooper, *Eric Voegelin and the Foundations of Modern Political Science*, suggests that patterns of snowflakes or clouds, the distinctive shapes of oak or holly leaves have no pragmatic relation to causal sequences, and thus manifest this superabundant break from determinism.)

- 3.5 In OH 3 V hardly elucidates the various features of play, other than its dimension of the superabundance. For this one perhaps needs to turn to his review of H, where he notes the dimensions of rhythm and melody, and its nonutilitarian character, along with its capacity to become "a source for the creation of new worlds of meaning beyond the everyday world" (163). V is reflecting the sketch of a phenomenology of play's dimensions in H's first chapter: H notes the following features: (1) voluntary; (2) disinterestedness; (3) proceeding within its own boundaries of space and time according to fixed rules; (4) promotes social groupings, which tend to stress secrecy and difference (13).
- 3.6 A suggestion: V is more interested in transcendence (and participation through transcendence in the community of being) than he is in play; the latter is always viewed in the light of the former, and hence his special predilection for the "serious play" of Plato, a theme which resurfaces occasionally in OH (e.g., 4: 289) and "Gospel and Culture" (CW 12: 188). Play per se is a vehicle for meaning, along with other things, not the meaning itself, he had said in his review of H, intermediate between existence's necessity and its intellectual and spiritual elements. We could say then, that what theologian Hugo Rahner had said in his own *Man at Play* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972) seems characteristic in some ways of V: "My starting-point will be the last page of the work, *Homo ludens*, by that great philosopher of civilization Johan Huizinga, the page on which he just suggests that the loveliest things in the spiritual life of man are no more than imperfectly realized imitations of that Divine Wisdom which since the beginning of time makes play before the face of God. This is where I take up the thread, and what I am aiming at is a theological and religious interpretation of play" (5). The difference, of course, is that V is not doing theology precisely, but is more focused on philosophical anthropology (to which he thinks H makes an important contribution, preferable to the thinned out anthropologies of the Enlightenment) as it impinges on political existence and theory. A further difference is that V stresses more the view of the Divine of Plato, which H refers to just prior to his noting Proverbs 8.22-23, 30-31; V only refers to Prov 8 in OH 4, even citing wisdom's playing, but he does not note the element of play or focus on it; again he notes how the text represents a further differentiation of pneumatic consciousness via a female symbolism (99-100).

It would not be accurate to say that H is not interested in transcendence or spirit. His book, you might say, rather than starting with it, works up to it in and through the various forms of play. Toward the final chapters, H reveals more of his classical and Christian orientation, in the light of which he is able to distinguish false from true play. "Only through an ethos that transcends the friend-foe relationship and recognizes a higher goal than the gratification of the self, the group or the nation will a political society pass beyond the 'play' of war to true seriousness" (211). "real civilization cannot exist in the absence of a certain play-element, for civilization presupposes limitation and mastery of the self, the ability not to confuse its own tendencies with the ultimate and highest goal, but to understand that it is enclosed within certain bounds freely accepted" (211). "Whenever we are seized with vertigo at the ceaseless shuttlings and spinnings in our mind of the thought: What is play?

What is serious? we shall find the fixed, unmoving point that logic denies us, once more in the sphere of ethics. Play, we began by saying, lies outside morals. In itself it is neither good nor bad. But if we have to decide whether an action to which our will impels us is a serious duty or is licit as play, our moral conscience will at once provide the touchstone. As soon as truth and justice, compassion and forgiveness have part in our resolve to act, our anxious question loses all meaning. One drop of pity is enough to lift our doing beyond intellectual distinctions. Springing as it does from a belief in justice and divine grace, conscience, which is moral awareness, will always whelm the question that eludes and deludes us to the end, in a lasting silence" (213).

4. Placing the theme of play in the overture introduction to his entire work of OH suggests that V considered it an underlying thread characterizing humanity's search for order, albeit at various levels of quality. In this way he comes close to H, who thought humanity was just as much *ludens* as *sapiens*. In his review of H, V had suggested that H thought humanity more *ludens* than *sapiens*. At one place, H does say that the "Aristotelian *animal ridens* characterizes man as distinct from the animal almost more absolutely than *homo sapiens*" (6). If it be so, that play is one of those master themes, how might it surface in V's work? For the most part, it is only implied. The following are suggestions of how this may be so.
 - 4.1 **Contest and struggle** (the "agonistic"), explored by H (chap. 3 esp.), are constant themes in OH; perhaps this is why he chooses the genre of the drama in the introduction; he also cites Plato on the tragedy: "the noblest of dramas," we recall (see *Laws* 817b-d).
 - 4.2 **Tension**, closely related to the agon, is another central theme shared by both H and V (e.g., OH 1: 40; 4: 86) certainly. "Play is \diamond tense' \diamond In gambling and athletics it is at its height. Though play as such is outside the range of good and bad, the element of tension imparts to it a certain ethical value in so far as it means a testing of the player's prowess: his courage, tenacity, resources and, last but not least, his spiritual powers \diamond his \diamond fairness'; because, despite his ardent desire to win, he must still stick to the rules of the game" (Huizinga, *Homo ludens*, 11). V, of course, stresses this implied ethical dimension \diamond he is always interested in the implied philosophical anthropology.
 - 4.3 Related to this is the theme of the "**metaxy,**" **the in-between**, which the later V so stressed (see OH 4: index). This links up with the theme of eutrapelia, of the just-so balance between the serious and the ludic (see H. Rahner, *Man at Play*, chap. 5). H implies this dimension of the in-between especially in the struggle between the serious and the playful, a theme running throughout his book. Where the metaxy is in a healthy state, following Plato, we should expect the play element to be healthy as well. (Gadamer, in his discussion of the hermeneutical significance of play, stresses the in-between character of play as well.)

- 4.4 V had noted how play expresses the illumination by consciousness of humanity's struggle for order. Play evokes consciousness, and even a freedom from a strict determinism. Thus play gives expression to a certain hopefulness, and steers V away from a Manichaeian reading of history. In his unfinished OH 5, we see a new interest in imagination, a quality typically associated with play and its quality of freedom, and even the view that "reality [can be characterized as] internally imaginative" (52; cf. 51-54). Here V presents a "friendly" alternative to Jacques Derrida, who uses the play theme in the interests of his own deconstruction criticism. Derrida argues that play is beyond the alternatives of being's presence and absence; it is thus something opposed to the classical project, for there is no center or origin; hence the unending need for supplementarity ("Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," in his *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978], 289). V, while suggesting that there are some tendencies toward hypostatization in the later Plato, thus indicating some measure of agreement with Derrida, would argue that there is a center and origin, but it is more playful and mysterious, in Plato (OH 3: 65, 330, 377).
- 4.5 The role of myth, and humanity's and the philosopher's need to take recourse to the myth, despite the pneumatic and philosophical breakthroughs, is another playful aspect of V's thought, sharing something of H's concerns (see chap. 8 of *Homo ludens*, and V, e.g., OH 3: 237-48). "The new dimension of conscious play is the characteristic of Plato's mythical creation. What is new on the level of Plato is not the element of play itself but rather the inner freedom of the play, engendered by the growth and differentiation of the personal psyche from the sixth century onward. While the inner distance from the myth inevitably destroys the naivete of the play, and the myth consequently becomes for Plato a work of art, it must not destroy the 'truth' of the myth. Plato knows that one myth can and must supersede the other, but he also knows that no other human function, for instance, 'reason' or 'science,' can supersede the myth itself. The myth remains the legitimate expression of the fundamental movements of the soul" (OH 3: 240).
- 4.6 The "frivolous play of the sophists" (OH 3: 311) is perhaps further explored in V's various analyses of pneumopathology; for example, he contrasts Plato's serious play with the magic of the gnostics (*Science, Politics, and Gnosticism*, CW 5: 256). There is something about the pathologies of metastasis, apocalyptic, and gnosticism making them attractive; V even mentions terrorism as well. For V it was always the element of misplaced transcendence, but the play factor, which implies the transcendence, might also add helpful insights. See OH 5: 47ff; 58, and Joseba Zulaika and William Douglass, *Terror and Taboo: The Follies, Fables, and Faces of Terrorism* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 134ff, for suggestions on how play manifests itself in terrorism and counter-terrorism.
- 4.7 So far as I can tell, the play element of Judaeo-Christian revelation remains unexplored in V; V remains more Plato-inspired in his references to play, and the patres are similar (Rahner's *Man at Play*, to wit). This is an area deserving more study.

4.8 Finally, H had opined that the essence of play was to be found in the experience of "fun": "Why does the baby crow with pleasure? Why does the gambler lose himself in his passion? Why is a huge crowd roused to frenzy by a football match? This intensity of, and absorption in, play finds no explanation in biological analysis. Yet in this intensity, this absorption, this power of maddening, lies the very essence, the primordial quality of play. Nature, so our reasoning mind tells us, could just as easily have given her children all those useful functions of discharging superabundant energy, of relaxing after exertion, of training for the demands of life, of compensating for unfulfilled longings, etc., in the form of purely mechanical exercises and reactions. But no, she gave us play, with its tension, its mirth, and its fun♦.it is precisely this fun-element that characterizes the essence of play" (*Homo ludens*, 2-3).

Hopefully we have seen something of this fun-element in V's work, with the help of H. I do believe that V's work has this quality: just when it seems the tension is unrelieved, we come upon something like: "Man doth not live by perversity alone!"

Abbreviations:

OH = Eric Voegelin, *Order and History*, 5 vols., Collected Works, vols. 14-18, Columbia : University of Missouri Press, 2000-1.

CW = Collected Works of Eric Voegelin, Columbia : University of Missouri Press.

H = Johan Huizinga

V = Eric Voegelin