Whitehead's "Freedom and Order" and the *Homo Ludens* Hypothesis in Education

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The author examines a recently discovered and previously unpublished article by famous mathematician and philosopher Alfred North Whitehead called "Freedom and Order," for which Whitehead proposed as a title or subtitle "Wit and Humour." Dombrowski explores this article in light of Johan Huizinga's classic work, *Homo Ludens*. Whitehead and Huizinga, he argues, share the view not that human culture arises out of play, but that human culture, especially education, is a type of play. **Key words***:* Alfred North Whitehead; freedom; humor; Johan Huizinga; order; play; wit

Introduction

In the second volume devoted to Alfred North Whitehead's essays recently published by Edinburgh University Press, there appears a previously unpublished article by the famous mathematician and philosopher. Apparently, Whitehead wrote it between 1922 and 1940. It is significant that Whitehead scribbled the words "wit and humour" below the title "Freedom and Order," either as an alternative or as a subtitle (Whitehead 2025b). In this article, I explore the relationship between these two pairs of concepts—freedom and order, on the one hand, and wit and humor, on the other—as they relate to contemporary education in particular. For this, I use Johan Huizinga's classic work *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (written in the late 1930s and early 1940s, hence in a period roughly contemporaneous with Whitehead's essay) as a searchlight that enables us to understand the surprising ludic elements in Whitehead's thought. Further, I show how these ludic elements are not ancillary to Whitehead's major concerns as a philosopher. Rather, they take us to the heart of his thought.

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Wit and Humor

To get us started, let me consider the stipulative definitions of wit and humor offered by Whitehead, definitions that place these two terms uneasily under the generic notion of amusement. Wit involves the amusing function of mind produced by conscious discrimination and analysis, whereas humor is that amusing function of mind produced by unconscious association with emotion and habit (Whitehead 2025b). One is initially reminded here respectively of Whitehead's famous distinction between (surface level) perception in the mode of presentational immediacy and (deeper) perception in the mode of causal efficacy, (Whitehead [1929] 1978). That is, humor and causal efficacy are more basic than wit and presentational immediacy.

Causal efficacy (allied with Whitehead's humor) is the primitive, ubiquitous feature of all reality. It is the basic mode of inheritance from past data, but the feelings it transmits are vague, massive, and inarticulate. Presentational immediacy (allied with Whitehead's wit), by contrast, is the product of causal efficacy. It is articulate, sharp, and sophisticated. Whitehead's quarrel with modern accounts of perception is that, by emphasizing visual perception, they are prejudiced in favor of presentational immediacy, whereas causal efficacy is more closely tied to touch and memory. In fact, by overemphasizing presentational immediacy, we fail to account for the insistent efficacy of the external world on us and are led toward David Hume's worries related to the disconnectedness of one occasion of experience from its predecessors. In Whitehead's view, causal efficacy and humor are visceral and integrally connected to what has happened previously. He points us toward perception in the mode of "symbolic reference," in which perception in the mode of causal efficacy and perception in the mode of presentational immediacy work together (see Sherburne 1966). That is, symbolic reference is analogous to the rapprochement Whitehead hopes for between humor and wit.

In Whitehead's essay, the connection is made explicitly with education. Today the young are educated wittily, whereas in his youth Whitehead was educated humorously. But both sorts of education stretch beyond amusement, or any association with pleasure, toward very serious topics. University professors, for example, produce wit. In fact, academic deans are often in the business of suppressing unseemly humor. It is understandable that a person with humor would want a summer vacation, but it takes wit to secure the appropriate travel reservations. Or again, the habits of religion result from deep-rooted emotions

associated with humor, whereas the specific dogmas of religion are the result of wit. Religious and other education ally with wit, very often employing an instrumental version of wit supposedly appropriate for the contemporary age. But the roots of humor, it should be emphasized, lie deep in our evolutionary pasts, as when certain species of birds feel the need to engage in yearly migration. Humor, as it were, is related to the historical "humors" that at least in part made biological organisms what they were (Whitehead 2025b).

Whitehead is thought provoking, not only in the way he distinguishes between wit and humor, but also in the way he relates these to the concepts in the title of his essay. Order is closely related to humor, and freedom (or at least the spur toward freedom) is closely related to wit. Good education involves cooperation between both freedom and order, on the one hand, and between wit and humor, on the other. As is argued in Whitehead's ([1929] 1967) famous *Aims of Education*, going too far in either direction leads to educational impediments. Premature or inappropriate intrusion of morality is fatal to humor, Whitehead thinks, in that morality arises from the fussiness of wit. A cat playing with a mouse is part of its humor, whereas the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SPCA) indicates the interference of wit. However, some humor lies on the cusp of morality, as exhibited, Whitehead thinks, in the quasimoral judgments made in Gilbert and Sullivan operettas, such as the claim in *The Mikado* that the punishment should fit the crime, a sign of support for criminal justice reform in the late-nineteenth century (Whitehead 2025b).

The French philosopher Henri Bergson was certainly correct, Whitehead thinks, that intelligence (and wit) operating on its own distorts the universe, including the educational universe. Here we need another semitechnical term in Whitehead that is found when he stipulatively defines imagination as the fusion of wit and humor. That is, either wit or humor alone work to the detriment of education and to the detriment of the overall effort to live well. Whereas wit tends to hold things apart as disparate, or to rip them apart, humor signals the connectedness among things (Whitehead 2025b). Here I would like to call attention to the ancient Greek etymology of analysis as involving two things: the breaking apart of the object analyzed as well as the liberation that occurs through study of the broken parts. Whitehead often cites the line from William Wordsworth suggesting that we murder to dissect (e.g., Whitehead [1925] 1967; also see Wordsworth 1936).

It turns out that Bergson gets only part of the story correct. The defender

of wit, as the later product of consciousness, gets the other part correct. Wit is prone to a debunking, satirical mentality that critically breaks apart everything, both good and bad. This defect is counterbalanced by the ability of someone with wit to propose ideals and supposedly impractical schemes "up in the clouds" that can lead to greater freedom and progress. Once again, it is the fusion of wit and humor that produces great imaginative feeling. Humor preserves historical legacy, along with its tremendous, fateful tendency. The common goings-on of the universe inherited from the past cannot be ignored. In this regard, Wordsworth was the great poet of humor because his imagination was hampered by a lack of wit. Whitehead thinks that William Shakespeare came closer to a balance between wit and humor, despite the fact that it was Wordsworth, rather than Shakespeare, who was a major influence on Whitehead (Whitehead 2025a). Wit fades more quickly than humor because the latter requires of us a more patient view of historical, biological, even geological time. The essence of survival lies in humor (Whitehead 2025b).

Modern literature and modern universities suffer from an excess of wit, Whitehead thinks, and very often from an excess of a nasty, vindictive wit that confronts humor directly. Indeed, the spur toward freedom and progress made possible by wit is to be welcomed, but one must always keep in mind, Whitehead advises, the price that might have to be paid for progress. It is well known that Whitehead claimed the pure conservative works against the essence of an ever-changing, dynamic universe (Whitehead [1933] 1967). But it should also be noted that, on the evidence from "Freedom and Order," the pure progressive is also working against the nature of the universe. Whitehead's greatest philosophical discovery, it could be argued, is prehension. And this discovery prevents us from going too far in either direction. We are not cut off from the past, as David Hume implied, but prehend (or grasp) wide interest from the past that precedes any explicit analysis of things (Whitehead 2025b).

Even democracy involves humor because it requires, over time, that habits conducive to fair decision-making procedures in a pervasively pluralistic society be developed and maintained. That is, democracies flourish when the desire to be fair to everyone becomes second nature, when we (humorously) seek justice as a matter of intuitive conviction. Without deep feeling of some sort regarding a common good, a feeling that binds people together, such procedures will be difficult to establish and even more difficult to maintain. In the absence of a habitual feeling for the common good, authoritarianism is a real danger (see Dombrowski 2019, 2022). Of course, for human beings there can be no such

thing as *pure* humor. There is always, for beings like us who are equipped for rational thought, an intermixture with wit and hence some grade of imagination. Again, without wit there could be no novelty, no striving after ideals, no educational institutions, no intellectualized religion, and no advanced technology (Whitehead, "Freedom and Order," 409).

Our already mentioned ability to engage in rational thought is, it should be noted, intermittent in its control of habit and orderly influence from the past. Apart from wit, however, any societal change that might occur would be miniscule and gradual. A balanced, imaginative self-respect is the result of three factors, Whitehead thinks: freedom; a sense of mutual obligation (found in both feudalism and mild forms of twentieth-century socialism, each of which rely on community service, communal education, and some version of universal medical care); and religion. Whitehead means by "religion" a sense of perfection and a glimpse of the ideal that shapes our routes of approximation to it. The prime opponent to religion, as Whitehead conceives things, is the positivist commitment to the claim that there really are no ideals and no logic of perfection, to use Charles Hartshorne's phrase (Hartshorne 1962). These are mere human constructions, on the positivist view. Without an aim beyond mere matters of fact, however, there is sterility, on Whitehead's alternative account (Whitehead 2025b).

Whitehead was led to the conviction that ideals do exist by his experience as a mathematician and geometer. In his well-known method of extensive abstraction, a point is not so much a primitive entity out of which the world is made, say, as in a Seurat painting. Rather, a point is an ideal limit that can be approached only asymptotically. Consider a square of a certain size whose sides are halved so as to make a smaller square, then these sides are halved again, and so on to infinity. The resulting point is a derived, theoretical entity that functions as a limiting ideal (Whitehead 1919).

But ideals have important roles to play in many disciplines other than mathematics. The literature taught in schools has unfortunately largely lost religion in Whitehead's sense of this concept. It has largely lost any sense of the ideal such that what is taught has been reduced to the commonplace. What is lost is the sense that education is moving toward, or could move toward, a future ideal, even if admittedly we can never know the future in any great detail. Confusion permits no ideals. Whitehead's thesis seems to be, if I understand him correctly, that freedom (or wit) requires order (or humor) and both of these require religion (i.e., ideals). Family affection is one sort of order that can provide a basis for

freedom and even for progress if the ideals provided within a family structure are defensible ones. Religion, Whitehead emphasizes, is dangerous precisely because, in addition to providing commendable ideals, it is also capable of proposing ideals that work together against a flourishing life. There can be no true statesmanship and no true education without ideals, even if such ideals—that is, justice and truth, respectively—can never be fully realized. As before, such ideals determine routes of approximation even if, as in calculus, they cannot be reached (Whitehead 2025b).

Whitehead closes the essay with a plea to bring together, in Platonic fashion, the good and the beautiful, which are respectively somewhat analogous to wit and humor. Another fruitful way to put the contrast is to say that there is a need to bring together moral imperatives and aesthetic purposes. The much-maligned Jesuits of the seventeenth century tried admirably to do this in their worldwide network of educational institutions, which encouraged students to advance both morally and aesthetically. But since the eighteenth century, due to the influence of Adam Smith and others, the inclination has been to pull these two tendencies, in all of their variety, asunder (Whitehead 2025b). As Whitehead notes in other contexts, "The first thing that a teacher has to do when he enters the classroom is to make his class *glad* to be there" and "You who are pupils must bring your own *enjoyment* to your tasks" (Whitehead 2025a, 61–62—emphases added). These ludic insights, I am arguing, are as much aesthetic as moral and ought to inform our responses to the task Whitehead sets before us: "For each succeeding generation, the problem of Education is new" (Whitehead 2025a, 266).

In one sense, there is something radically new in this essay because Whitehead only infrequently mentions, in different contexts and with different meanings, the concepts of wit and humor (see, e.g., Whitehead [1925] 1967). In another sense, however, the above paragraphs are meant to indicate that what he means by wit and humor links up nicely with several of the well-known major themes in his philosophy: freedom and order, presentational immediacy and causal efficacy, religious ideals (and the primordial nature of God), as well as the need for harmony and (religious) ideals in the educational process. In the following section I try to contextualize Whitehead's wit and humor (and imagination) within twentieth-century scholarship on the *homo ludens* hypothesis. That is, it is worthwhile to look at Whitehead's wit and humor both within the limited context of his own philosophy as well as within the overall context of human beings as players.

The work of two scholars inform the present project. First, George Allan has written three instructive books in the philosophy of education from a process point of view that flirt with the *homo ludens* hypothesis without naming it. Like Whitehead, Allan thinks that the key aim of any good teacher is to get students to like reading, writing, and talking about ideas (Dombrowski, forthcoming). And, second, Myron Jackson alerts us to the fact that Whitehead uses the word "entertainment" frequently in his writings as a semitechnical term that is conducive to a *homo ludens* reading of his philosophy. On Jackson's account, Whitehead warns us against immediately rushing to judgment regarding a proposition's truth or falsity because it is, in a way, more important that a proposition be aesthetically interesting than that it be true (Whitehead [1929] 1978). That is, there is a need to slow down the rush to judgment so as to entertain propositions, to mull them over, to consider their internal consistency and their consequences, and to think about whether their acceptance would enhance reflective equilibrium with other propositions that we already accept or whether it would put them in a dangerous state of disequilibrium. It is a mark of much contemporary dogmatism in education to be unable to entertain propositions in Whitehead's sense of entertainment (Jackson 2025). In the next section, I attempt to build on Allan's and Jackson's ideas with the aid of Johan Huizinga.

Huizinga and the Human Player

Huizinga himself corrects what eventually (and erroneously) became the subtitle of the English translation of his famous book. He is not studying the play element *in* culture along with other parts of culture (education, religion, business, politics), but instead the play aspect *of* culture. That is, culture itself, including education, is a type of play. The point here is not to denigrate education or any other part of culture, but to elevate our concept of play, as in the use of wit and humor in Whitehead's essay "Freedom and Order." Huizinga and Whitehead agree that play is older than culture because even nonhuman animals play. Although it may be true that play in animals and human beings serves biological and educational functions, Huizinga is quick to point out the danger of concluding too quickly that the value of play points beyond itself. There is an autotelic quality to play that should not be missed. Further, every metaphor used in academic disciplines is a play on words, as in the flow of money in economics (a hydrology metaphor) or the search for causal mechanisms in chemistry (a machinery metaphor that

is seldom recognized as such). When viewed *sub specie ludi*, more things than athletic contests and theatrical performances involve play (Huizinga 1955).

Play can be very serious, therefore it is a mistake to see play and seriousness as irrevocably opposed. Behind Huizinga (and Whitehead), there exists an Aristotelian sense of moderation. At one extreme can be found a strictly nonserious sort of foolishness or buffoonery, while at the other extreme can be found a boorish, overly serious view that fails to adjust well to the inevitable tragedy in life. In between sits the virtue of ready wit, or we might add under Whitehead's guidance, ready humor (see Aristotle 1984). I am attempting in this article to sort out a family of aesthetic and quasimoral terms that we often run together indiscriminately: wit, humor, foolishness, jest, joke, comedy, and nonseriousness, for example. Huizinga sees play as an essentially voluntary activity, and Whitehead agrees but with the proviso that it is particularly wit (if not humor) which connects with freedom and the ability to move beyond established order. In addition to its voluntary character, Huizinga sees play as in some fashion separate from the commonplace world. It constitutes a realm apart from quotidian concerns. Once again, one suspects that Huizinga's play lies closer to Whitehead's wit than to humor. In any event, Huizinga and Whitehead are pointing us toward the interlude or intermezzo quality of our lives, which is reminiscent of the biblical vanity of all things or the Shakespearean sense that all of life is a stage and that we are merely players (Huizinga 1955).

Before fully conceding that Huizinga's play is closer to Whitehead's wit than to humor, however, we should note that the play world in a way constitutes a consecrated spot within the ordinary world in which a peculiar order reigns. Indeed, Huizinga emphasizes that play is often orderly and rule bound. In addition, play is closer to aesthetics than to ethics because it is best characterized by terms like beauty, tension, poise, balance, and other aesthetic (humor-related) designations. In a characterization of play that resonates well with Whitehead's use of wit and humor together, Huizinga argues that in play we step out of common reality into a higher order, not in a dualistic manner but in something closer to Whitehead's concept of approximation to ideals. Huizinga, like Whitehead, appeals to Plato in this regard. Huizinga makes his case an appeal to Plato's *Laws* (1999): a human being is God's plaything, and this is the best part of humanity. Life should be, and in any event often is, lived as play. Play, like Whiteheadian wit and humor, are elevated to the highest regions of the human spirit toward which education should strive (Huizinga 1955).

Huizinga's reference to an aboriginal layer of the human also reminds us

more of Whiteheadian humor than of wit and more of causal efficacy than of presentational immediacy. Play, like humor, is a mood that is indicative of this layer, which allies both Huizinga and Whitehead with preliterate cultures that play without shame, because they have not yet been inundated with wit (Huizinga 1955).

We are so attuned to thinking of cultural differences as vast that we might be surprised to see Huizinga claim that all peoples play and play remarkably alike. One indication of this is the prevalence of play words in languages across the globe and across the ages. Ancient Greek, for example, has at least three words for play: *paidia, aduro,* and *agon*. The first of these we associate with the childlike activity we often consider play. The third of these is associated with very competitive play. That is, the Greek language indicates the different sorts of play in which human beings engage and that are interwoven with the two ludic elements in Whitehead's essay. Play can be tinged with the trifling, but it can also be characterized by intense conflict (see Dombrowski 2009). Or better, play often exhibits a combination of the trifling and the competitive. Huizinga is most interesting when he engages in a comparative analysis of play language in Sanskrit, Chinese (with *cheng* being a close equivalent to the Greek *agon*), Blackfoot (with *koani* being a close equivalent to the Greek *paidia*), Japanese (with *asobi* referring to activities as diverse as athletic contests and tea ceremonies), various Semitic languages (as in the Arabic *la'iba* pointing to the play of a musical instrument), Latin (with *ludus* providing the etymological root for the *homo ludens* hypothesis), the Romance languages, the Germanic languages (with Immanuel Kant in particular talking often about the play of ideas and the play of imagination), and others. Whitehead's treatment of wit and humor as if they were universal is not as far off the mark as it may seem initially. In fact, the play concept seems much more prevalent than its supposed (but not real) opposite in seriousness, with many languages associating play words with erotic activity, as in the current designation of someone who is sexually active as "a player" (Huizinga 1955).

Some may mistakenly think that Huizinga claims culture arises out of play and then outgrows it once people become educated. This is not his view. Rather, he argues that culture is played from the very beginning and is still played. We can see here an enlightening similarity to Whitehead when he says that wit and humor are still the major components to high-level imaginative feeling. The aforementioned mistaken view appears at least understandable when we realize that there exists a ludic element in bird song, noticed by both Huizinga and the

process thinker Charles Hartshorne (see Hartshorne 1973; Dombrowski 2004). But this element of play never becomes lost as we move into human culture, even if it often gets concealed by educational institutions, religious rituals, political campaigns, professional athletic events, and other activities in the contemporary world. Although sacral performances and festal contests may tend to hide the play element on which they are based, especially in the aggressive competitions often found in the latter, the skilled observer has little difficulty peeling back the veneer that covers play, both witty and humorous (Huizinga 1955).

Huizinga notes that the Greek *agon* was etymologically related to *agora*, thus forcing us to consider the fact that it is competitive play that often brings us together as a people. Huizinga does not notice—although he could have—that our word competition literally means to "ask with" one's opponent: who is better today at a certain playful activity? Without one's opponent, there would be no game. Cheating (in education, sports, politics, filing tax documents) is an attempt to rob action of its element of play. To avoid the problem of cheating, however, one need not eliminate competition altogether. Competitive activities can be quite beneficial, as when betting on life expectancies in the early modern period led to the rise of the insurance industry or as when the Kwakiutl famously made competitive giving in the potlach part of a sacred feast (Huizinga 1955).

The biggest impediment to a fair hearing for the *homo ludens* hypothesis, including Whitehead's use of wit and humor, proves to be the mistaken idea that the sacredness and seriousness of an activity precludes a quality of play. Consider the relationship between law and play. Although these may seem to a casual observer to be far apart, with just a little effort one can decipher the contest involved in a legal *agon,* and where there is contest there is play. A courtroom is something of a sacred circle, with a gown (or wig) enabling the judge to take on—that is, to play—a separate identity from the one he or she enjoys in everyday life. The desire to win in the courtroom is held in check by precise rules of the legal game, which ask of the judge and jury to engage in deliberation (from the Latin *deliberare*, to weigh reasons on both sides, as if on a scale). We hope that the proper education has prepared judge and jury well for this deliberative activity. Such deliberation is meant to counteract the slanging match that often occurs between the contending lawyers, examples of which proliferate around the globe, for example, in Eskimo drumming matches. The well-known Latin *litigium* (or quarrel proceeding) constitutes but one instance of the playful rhetorical dexterity usually found in legal disputes (Huizinga 1955). From a Whiteheadian point of view, we can see both the prevalence of lawyerly

wit and the presence in individuals of good humor in that intuitive sense on the verge of morality which allows for innocent people not to be convicted and for perpetrators of crimes actually to be held to account.

Even war is commonly called a game, and educational preparation for war actually involves war games. The fighting that occurs in war is bound by rules. When these rules are broken, as they often are, there almost always occurs an attempt to hide the atrocity so as to give the impression that the rules of the game have been followed. Huizinga fears that contemporary "total war" (*Homo Ludens* was written in Holland around the time of World War II) might extinguish altogether the play element in war. But terminating the play element in war will be difficult if the ludic function proves inherent in *agon* and to its antagonists. In addition to the territorial and economic functions that war claims to serve, there also exist the glory and honor of war as motivating factors. We should also note the aesthetic values highlighted in war, evident in the immense amount of war art and literature related to war, from the time of Homer's *Iliad* to Pablo Picasso's *Guernica*. Both ancient China and medieval Europe developed a sense of chivalric honor in the warrior's craft so that deviations from the rules of war, however real they are, had to be hidden or apologized for or justified in terms of some allegedly higher good (Walzer 1977). In the complete absence of both *jus ad bellum* (a just cause to fight for) and *jus in bello* (just action in the conduct of the war itself, as in adherence to a principle of noncombatant immunity), human community would be nearly impossible because such an absence would permit *everyone* to be killed. Martial athletic events allow military virtues like loyalty to bleed, often literally, into activities other than war, including into education. Further, the fact that the concept of a just war is not an idle theory seems evident in the adoption of this theory via international law by virtually every country in the world, at least nominally, that favors war as a rule-bound activity (Huizinga 1955). Whitehead, as well, while presumably writing "Freedom and Order" in the interwar period, saw wit and humor within the overall context of a bellicose world. We should not be surprised that in this essay Whitehead uses examples of the freedom developed in democratic cultures being threatened by those who prefer order instead at any cost.

If even law and war can be seen as exhibiting ludic qualities, we should not be surprised to find such qualities in knowledge claims and in their propagation through educational institutions. Riddle-solving competitions were basic to the ancient Vedic lore in India that resulted in the Upanishads. These riddles can be quite serious, especially when the riddle solver's life is at stake. Likewise, in

ancient Greece the responses to enigmatic questions often required logical reasoning. The riddle as a literary genre is integral both to the ludic and the quest for knowledge, as in the Oedipus stories. It is out of riddles that the *aporia* of Platonic and Aristotelian philosophy develop. A dilemma is literally a choice between two and only two options, both of which are fraught with danger. Therefore dilemmas are a particularly difficult sort of problem to solve. The Greek *problema* refers to a challenge put before a group of people who are in a polemical yet oxymoronically friendly *agon* with each other (*polemos* is the Greek word for war). Indeed, in some early philosophers like Heraclitus, the universe in general constitutes an *agon*, just as for ancient Chinese thinkers there exists a ubiquitous conflict between (or play between) *yin* and *yang* (Huizinga 1955).

It must be admitted that poets and other artists remain more explicitly and more self-consciously fixed within the ludic sphere than lawyers and university professors. Perhaps this is because poets and other artists create using the activities occurring in the playgrounds of their own minds. Even more than in other fields, poetry and other art forms are born in, and continue to live as, play. There is plenty of competition in art, as immortalized in Richard Wagner's opera *The Mastersingers of Nuremberg* as well as in Giorgio Vasari's *Lives of the Artists* ([1550] 2008). Yet even without an element of competition, imagination nonetheless plays an obvious and dominating role, which, as before, Whitehead identifies with the fusion of wit and humor. Huizinga helps us understand Whitehead's point here. Although we commonly distinguish between a preliterate stage of culture on the one hand, one in which individuals believed literally the mythic stories at the base of their religion and culture and, on the other, a demythologized stage dominated by analytic thought in which such stories are no longer believed, Huizinga alerts us to an intermediary stage of human belief where (Whiteheadian) imagination flourishes. In this intermediate stage (or better, facet), the mythic stories are still taken seriously even if they are no longer believed literally. Here we are reminded of the religious function of ideals in Whitehead's liberal religion (Dombrowski 2017). We are reminded as well of the title of David Ray Griffin's important book. *Reenchantment Without Supernaturalism* (2001). Poetic and other artistic creations fan the flames of a reinchanted world. The intermediate or *intermezzo* view of the world, as with so much else that is worthwhile in the intellectual world, goes back to Plato, with Whitehead famously declaring that the safest possible generalization of Western philosophy is that it consists in a series of footnotes to Plato (Whitehead [1929] 1978, 39). Plato's own play on words in his dialogues and in his famous

images (as in the myth of the cave) is to be taken quite seriously, if not literally (Huizinga 1955).

Although Huizinga does not give explicit assent to the panpsychist (or panexperientialist) view favored by most process thinkers, he certainly leans in this direction. Whitehead never used the word "panpsychism" to describe his position, but he did not mind if others used this word to characterize his view (Whitehead 2021). To continue my point from the previous paragraph, Huizinga indicates a mixture of belief and unbelief in a world populated with living or personified forces everywhere. In a word, he plays with or entertains the idea of ubiquitous *anima,* an idea that hovers between fancy and conviction. Even the most abstract language in academic disciplines involves such a hovering, as when defenders of natural selection in biology imply—however metaphorically, however tongue-in-cheek—that there is some natural force who (or that) does the selecting. Consider, too, the famous invisible hand in economics that transforms self-interest into social benefit (which is Adam Smith's most influential idea). A half-joking element verging on make-believe seems inseparable from scholarly life. Here Huizinga is very much in line with Whitehead. Although dramatists and actors and audience members in a theater forthrightly play, many others in academe do so implicitly in the tragicomedy we call life (Huizinga 1955).

Both Huizinga and Whitehead take special interest in one particular aspect of education: the practice and teaching of philosophy. The play spirit has been there from the start with the public contests involving the sophists and the riddle-solving activities of priests in ancient India. In the ancient games of wit (in Whitehead's sense of the term) there occurred an oscillation between solemnity and mere amusement—say, when spectators cheered at every well-aimed crack. The common objection that Plato gives us only a caricature of the sophist is only partially true, Huizinga thinks. Our word "school" comes from the ancient Greek *schole*, which meant leisure. It is not easy to do philosophy if one is condemned to a life of grueling labor. But for those who are fortunate enough to have the leisure time to read and think and talk with others who have read and thought, there exists a fluid relationship between sophistry and philosophy, between eristic (arguing for argument's sake) and dialectic (serious conversation in which interlocutors together aim at the truth). Plato's dialogues make a great deal of this fluidity. Dialectic, if not eristic, is not only a game but a noble one. Aristotle tells us that Plato's dialogue form was an offshoot of comedy (Aristotle 1984), hence this nobility is in no danger of escaping the *homo ludens* hypothesis (Huizinga 1955).

In *Homo Ludens*, Huizinga offers a nuanced history of the origin and development of philosophy that illuminates as well the origin and development of Whitehead's wit.

> We can sketch the successive stages of philosophy roughly as follows: it starts in the remote past from the sacred riddle-game, which is at one and the same time ritual and festival entertainment. On the religious side it gives rise to the profound philosophy and theosophy of the Upanishads, to the intuitive flashes of the pre-Socratics; on the play side it produces the sophists. The two sides are not absolutely distinct. Plato raises philosophy, as the search for truth, to heights which he alone could reach, but always in that aerial form which was and is philosophy's proper element. Simultaneously it develops at a lower level into sophistical quackery and intellectual smartness. The agonistic factor in Greece was so strong that it allowed rhetoric to expand at the cost of pure philosophy, which was put in the shade by sophistication parading as the culture of the common man [*sic*]. Gorgias was typical of this deterioration of culture; he turned away from true philosophy to waste his spirit in the praise and misuse of glittering words and false wit. (151)

No sharp divide exists between play and knowledge. Huizinga, who was a noted medievalist, traces the agonic character of Platonic dialogue through to the medieval disputations that form the backbone of the philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas. The university, he thinks, constitutes the single greatest achievement of the Middle Ages. The medieval universities (Oxford, Cambridge, Paris, Salamanca, Jagiellon, Cologne, and Bologna) were built on academic competition. All knowledge, Huizinga argues, must be polemical and agonistic because without criticism ideas become stagnant and foster a debilitating sort of dogmatism (Dombrowski 2006). How often we have what we think are brilliant ideas until they are presented in public before a critical audience (Huizinga 1955)!

It bothers Huizinga to notice that our culture is worn with age and too sophisticated for its own good, as is evidenced in our typical (indeed, cynical) disdain for sacred ritual or play. Whitehead makes almost exactly the same point when he notices the dominance of wit over humor in his contemporary world. But neither thinker asks us to return romantically to a previous age. Rather,

they push us forward toward a more harmonious fusion of play and seriousness (Huizinga) and of humor and wit (Whitehead). These fusions are facilitated by music when construed generally to refer in Platonic fashion to include singing and dancing and other auditory and kinesethetic pursuits that have both pedagogical (especially as being propaedeutic to the development of a philosophic mind) and autotelic purposes. That is, music so understood harbors elements of both a noble educational game and the art for art's sake movement. It both morally improves us and offers us a respite from boredom or confusion. Because of the involvement of the whole body, Huizinga goes so far as to say that dance (again, broadly construed so as to include many other bodily activities) is the purest and most perfect form of play (Huizinga 1955).

Huizinga's overall thesis that culture does not come *from* play but arises *as* play, I am arguing, illuminates an analogous view in Whitehead regarding wit and humor. In addition, in both thinkers there is the sense that a culture (both of them prefer the word "civilization," which unfortunately conjures up images of a contrast with the "primitive") on the wane leans too far in the direction of wit and away from a more fecund configuration of the ludic. Surprisingly, Huizinga thinks that much maligned medieval culture may have struck a better balance than we have struck in the contemporary era between play and seriousness and between humor and wit. For example, due to the fact that even serfs experienced many religious feast days throughout the liturgical year as free days, they surprisingly enjoyed more time to engage in play than members of the working class do today (see Kelly 2012; also Huizinga [1919] 1996). Or again, perhaps the greatest thinker of the sixteenth century, Desiderius Erasmus, radiated the spirit of play with a tendency toward light irony and infectious jocosity (see Huizinga 1957). As before, however, neither Huizinga nor Whitehead are advocating a return to the past characteristic of conservative romantic thinkers. The issue is complicated because, despite the cliché of the romantic thinker as a brooding, melancholy figure who is constantly reminded of what has been lost, there is nonetheless a pervasive ludic element in playing with the idea that we should revert to antiquity as a source of ideals. For Huizinga and Whitehead, however, there is also a ludic quality to playing with models and ideals conducive to a better future. Further, the constant danger of sentimentalism haunts any effort to "make X great again." And the common overestimation of economic factors in culture—an exaggeration to which defenders of both capitalism and socialism are prone—poses an even greater challenge to the *homo ludens* hypothesis (Huizinga 1955).

Play and Contemporary Culture

From the nineteenth century until the present, the play elements of culture have suffered a noticeably reduced role. Ironically, this attenuated role for play is concomitant with the unprecedented rise of organized athletics. Although organized athletic competition flourished in ancient Greece, the recognition of games or bodily exercises as important cultural values was largely rejected from the ancient period until the nineteenth century. Bodily competition is clearly not new or restricted to only one era or one part of the world, but organized games and athletic competition occurred to only a slight degree before recent centuries. The transition from occasional amusement to a system of organized teams and scheduled games started, as we well know, in nineteenth-century England, which became the cradle and focus of contemporary athletics. In this regard, I find it interesting that during this very period in England Whitehead himself was an accomplished rugby player while attending school at Sherborne (Huizinga 1955; Whitehead 2025a).

It is a thorny problem to account convincingly for the apparent decline of the ludic quality of culture and the simultaneous rise of organized athletic events. One way to deal with this irony is to suggest, à la Huizinga, that the increasing systematization and regimentation of athletics means that the "play" found in these events is largely apparent rather than real. Professional athletics, which has now invaded the United States collegiate games, in particular, might not really be playful if they lack any spontaneity. Also, the great athletic competitions of the ancient world developed as parts of sacred festivals, whereas contemporary athletics are, Huizinga argues, profane, indeed unholy. When Huizinga views contemporary athletics, he sees primarily sterility and atrophy, not a culture-creating activity. For this reason, "athletics" may be a better word to use when characterizing Huizinga's skeptical view rather than "sport," regardless of his own practice using the terms interchangeably. The former term comes from the ancient Greek *athleuein*, to compete for a prize, whereas the latter term comes from the French *desporter,* to frolic about playfully (Huizinga 1955).

On Huizinga's view, if one plays one must do so, to some degree, like a child. Here one notices the close connection to ancient *paidia* and to Whitehead's humor rather than to wit. If one does not play humorously, the virtue has gone out of the game. In the following edifying quotation from *Homo Ludens*, Huizinga lays out the thorny problem of how to understand the relationship between play and our contemporary world.

> The attempt to assess the play-content in the confusion of modern life is bound to lead us to contradictory conclusions. In the case of sport we have an activity nominally known as play but raised to such a pitch of technical organization and scientific thoroughness that the real play-spirit is threatened with extinction. Over against this tendency to over-seriousness, however, there are other phenomena pointing in the opposite direction. Certain activities whose whole *raison d'etre* lies in the field of material interest, and which had nothing to play about them in their initial stages, develop what we can only call play-forms as a secondary characteristic. Sport and athletics showed us play stiffening into seriousness but still being felt as play; now we come to serious business degenerating into play but still being called serious. The two phenomena are linked by the strong agonistic habit which still holds universal sway, though in other forms than before. (199)

Whereas some business leaders have tried to turn business into play so as to increase productivity from workers, and whereas some political leaders do a good job of turning the serious work of governing the *polis* into farce, the more striking trend, as I see things, has been to turn play into a witty and productive business. Something analogous can be said regarding the relationship between play and art as well as the relationship between play and science (Huizinga 1955).

Another feature of the contemporary world, in addition to the inverse relationship between attenuated play and robust organized athletics, is the growth of an illusion of play found in what Huizinga calls "puerileism," which is a blend of adolescence and barbarity. This phenomenon is characterized by a clique mentality oriented toward trivial recreation and crude sensationalism. This cliquishness fosters an intolerance toward outsiders and a loss of a sense of fair play and decency. That is, puerileism is by no means to be confused with playfulness. Huizinga takes his own example of this from the Nazi period in which he lived: "The spectacle of a society rapidly goose-stepping into helotry is, for some, the dawn of the millenium. We believe them to be in error" (Huizinga 1955, 206). As he also puts the point, very much in Whiteheadian fashion, "it is the decay of humour that kills" (Huizinga 1955, 207). Also like Whitehead, Huizinga saw in American politics at that time something delightfully naïve and humorous. In any event, both Huizinga and Whitehead would, I surmise, no longer recognize naivete and humor in United States politics, although there is

no doubt a great deal of wit. Law, including international law and educational standards, is especially important in the effort to secure the rules of the political and educational games that prevent the descent into full-fledged barbarism. The cheat or the spoil-sport does nothing less than shatter cultural life altogether (Huizinga 1955).

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