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Questioning Play: What play can tell us about social life, by Henning Eichberg, published by Routledge (London), 2016, 284 pp., £28 (ebook), ISBN 9781315545141

Sadly, this is Henning Eichberg's final monograph and one of his last published works prior to his death in April 2017. Over his 74 years, Henning provided a significant contribution to philosophical, sociological and historical literature on the body and human movement and *Questioning Play* brings together his final thoughts about the nature and value of human life in community with others. As you would expect from Henning, its core arguments are radical and unapologetic and he deliberately antagonizes the dogmatic analytic reviewers of his book proposal who wrote, "Without 'essentialist definitions' there is no clarity, and... 'This monograph is not a useful or important contribution to this subject... I do not recommend this for publication'." to which Henning responds, "I thank the reviewers for their rejection" (p250) and goes on to write his monograph anyway. I too disagree with these reviewers since this book most certainly provides a new perspective on a relevant topic – the nature of play and its relation to other aspects of being human, namely the impulse and desire to question. The central thesis that Eichberg proposes is that the acts of play and questioning are inextricably linked. To play is to question and to question is to play. Both are related to the quest of understanding and creating a life worth living.

The book consists of four parts: Cases of movement play; Critical questions to some play-philosophical commonplaces; Play as diversity and question; and Socio-political dimensions of play. The parts and their comprising chapters cover a range of diverse cases and issues, from sociological comments on the identity of Danish football to (the rejection of) definitions of play, to folk games and alienation. Eichberg sets out his methodology at the start, utilizing a narrative, case-study, 'bottom-up' approach in illuminating examples upon which to provide a phenomenological commentary. Whilst Eichberg notes this will not appeal to analytical philosophers, he maintains that "the overlap[ing] narratives do not express a disorder, but... are necessary. Phenomenological philosophy proceeds by network thinking, not as a streamlined system building." (p3) This perhaps explains why the chapters do not necessarily follow in logical order but rather provide a strobe effect illuminating topics in a quasi-systematic sequence. Indeed, the way in which the book is divided into four sections is arguably unnecessary since the sections seem to be indistinct and the chapters could have been arranged in any order without having any effect on the congruity of the book as a whole. This is something that Eichberg accepts and acknowledges since he suggests that the chapters can be read in any order. His insouciant approach to this is perhaps further evidence of his rejection of convention and lineally ordered approaches to research. There may also be another prosaic reason for this slight disjointedness in structure since many of the chapters are rewritten versions of previously published work.

In keeping with this dis-ordered approach, I too will focus on the chapters that are of most interest to me, and perhaps to the philosophical community more generally. Chapter 8 ‘Play and curiousness; what is the question?’ seems to be the one that is most explicitly connected to Eichberg’s core argument: that play is a form of questioning. It is also the one most tightly connected to the concept and activity of philosophy and one that provides a further defense of Eichberg’s philosophical approach. It starts with a comment about philosophers’ preoccupation with defining play and suggests that the question (‘what is play?’) may, in itself, point towards an answer. Eichberg catalogues the standard approaches — play as an as-if activity; play as meta-communication; play as a form of learning; play as a striving towards perfection — and then moves away from these analytic approaches to see play as an inherent part of being human, in the way that we interact with and attempt to understand the world and find our place in it. Play is a form of questioning: “the phenomenology of play, thus, leads to a phenomenology of asking.” (p174) Eichberg suggests that play is a way of directing questions towards the world that are beyond the bounds of language. It is a physical way of questioning. The question is also a primary feature of philosophy and Eichberg demonstrates how the question, philosophy, and play are entwined. This develops a theme initiated in chapter 2, on the labyrinth as a form of playful movement and questioning: wandering, winding and wondering. He finishes chapter 8 by suggesting that play as an undirected but rhythmic activity has the potential for socio-political power in uniting different sides of an argument.

The socio-political dimensions of play form the following two chapters. Chapter 9 attempts to highlight how folk-games are another illustration of being human and how despite not being explicitly political, nevertheless show a political identity of those involved. For Eichberg, folk-games, and the fear of folk-games — as demonstrated by (often religious) authorities who demonize and prohibit them — are a manifestation of our primary culture. This notion is also explored in chapters 10 and 6. Chapter 6 (a revised version of a chapter in my joint edited *Philosophical Perspectives of Play*) exposes the notion of dark play and undermines idealized accounts of play as being innocent and pure. It considers the relationship between play and war and the treatment of the ‘Other’ in ‘playful’ activities as depicted by the photographs of soldiers posing with Iraqi prisoners at Abu Ghraib. This chapter demonstrates the asymmetrical power relationships that can exist in play and how it can often make us (as spectators) uncomfortable. It also asks the normative question, when is play not play, and how we determine the limits of play. Eichberg does not provide an answer to this question but suggests that a keenness to place limits on the bounds of play may be a colonization of philosophical curiosity and that we may be better instead to study the person who is playing in ways that we find morally objectionable. Contrastingly, in chapter 10, Eichberg argues that play can provide an antidote to alienation. He draws upon Rosa’s theory of alienation through acceleration: a critical and over-whelming awareness of the pressing nature of time. Eichberg notes that play can transform even the most alienated environments, as demonstrated by

children who will play in any setting, such as bomb sites and concentration camps, and festivals where the playful spirit ensures time cannot be rushed. Yet, in a nod towards the ideas he provides in his chapter on dark play, he warns us not see play and alienation as a straightforward dualism. Play can be subsumed by acceleration which gives rise to incarnations such as modern sport, and its emphasis on measuring time and ultimately, results — Eichberg’s comments here note the severance of modern sport from play. It also reflects Eichberg’s criticism of modern constructions of play as a commodity to enhance progress and production, as given in chapter 4. For Eichberg, both play and alienation can take different forms and a nuanced understanding of them is required; “Just as play is not Play with a capital P in the singular, alienation is not Alienation with a capital A in the singular. Critical philosophy has to study the historical processes and thereby given varieties and inner contradictions of the phenomena — both of play and of alienation.” (p239)

Another illuminating and useful aspect to this book is Eichberg’s linguistic analysis of play. For those of us who are ashamedly monolingual, particularly in English, it is easy to be complacent and jingoistic about the meaning and use of particular words. Eichberg undermines this view by demonstrating in chapter 7 how words associated with play (sport, games, leisure) can differ significantly in meaning and use across languages, thus supporting his anthropological position in resisting formal definition. This is a valuable chapter that reminds us not to abstract the concept of play from the activity itself since there are countless applications, examples and derivations of activities that may or may not be considered play throughout human culture and history. Similarly, chapter 3 highlights colonial attitudes in the way that play has been categorized and described. This chapter tracks the evolution of the anthropology of play and provides further criticism of the analytic approach to understanding play.

The final thread running through the book is that of poetics. Eichberg argues that play can be seen as a practical kind of poetry seen through folk games, festivity and sporting culture. Through play and its more formal structure of games, humans demonstrate their poetic nature. Poetry develops from the inherent capacity for humans to be creative, and this in turn stems from their sense of wonder and desire to question. For Eichberg, it is *homo poeticus* that enriches the life of *homo ludens*.

Questioning Play, as the subtitle suggests, is a book that questions the way humans interact with others in a social life. It demonstrates how play is a fundamental aspect of human culture and that it rejects tidy analytic definitions and analysis. Eichberg shows how play as a form of questioning tells us who we are and he does this through an anthropological and phenomenological lens. As suggested at the outset, it may not appeal to hard-core analytic philosophers — Eichberg would undoubtedly argue that such people are doing philosophy badly since they are resisting the playful and questioning spirit that enables the activity of philosophy — but it nevertheless provides a unique and important vista on the concept of play.

It isn't a cohesive and tidy book that develops the argument from chapter to chapter. There are undoubtedly several threads that run through it but they are never fully untangled or neatly tied together. They do, nevertheless, provide illustrations of how play can be seen, represented and understood. Perhaps fittingly, they bring together Henning's most playful thoughts about the subject and illustrate the richness of the man himself.

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