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Fink's *Oasis of Happiness* and John Dewey. Play, Education, and Ontology

1. Introduction

Eugen Fink and John Dewey (18591952) share important overlapping influences and concerns. Dewey and Fink were both markedly shaped by Hegel. Dewey began his career steeped in Hegelian idealism but gradually began to react against all types of metaphysics as he became more pragmatic. And as one discovers in *Sein und Mensch* (1977) and other writings, Fink was an expert on Hegel. Besides both writing about play, Dewey and Fink were also philosophers of education. Dewey stands in a tradition of educational concern that was initiated by German thinkers who Fink was also familiar with. In his analysis of play in *Schools of To-morrow* (1915), Dewey notes that the inspiration for integrating play into the curriculum came from the German educational tradition, Friedrich Froebel (1782–1852) in particular.

This chapter is an introductory reading of Fink's *Oasis of Happiness* and how it compares and contrasts with Dewey's most important engagement with play: chapter 15 of his major philosophy of education book *Democracy and Education* (1916), titled »Play and Work in the Curriculum," and chapter 5 »Play« in *Schools of To-morrow*. Fink was familiar with Dewey's work but did not specifically elaborate on his use of play. In *Oasis of Happiness* Fink could have Dewey in mind as one of »the pioneers of modern pedagogy.« The engagement in this chapter with each will be specifically on the topic of play and education (9/14).[1]

[1] All translations from Eugen Fink, *Play as Symbol of the World and other Writings*, trans. I. A. Moore and C. Turner, Indiana 2016; in brackets, I provide the page number for the German text in this book first, followed by the page number of the English translation.

Though both philosophers work either implicitly or explicitly toward a phenomenology of play, their depth of inquiry varies. Dewey's analysis overlaps with Fink, but it does not approach the ontological level that *Oasis of Happiness* explores. For example, Dewey does not worry about the distinction between being »at play« versus »in play« though this does relate to the ambiguity of the phenomenon which both address (18/22). Dewey bases his analysis off firsthand reports of how American schools in the early 20th century were using play as part of the curriculum. He carefully observes play in the school and draws on his own experience as a child and as a teacher. Fink does not use any firsthand external observations to construct his phenomenology of play in *Oasis of Happiness*. Though he mentions pedagogy, Fink primarily leaves practical educational applications to the side by striving to succeed to the ontological level of analysis. At the beginning of »*Oasis of Happiness* he presents the need to question the ontological sense [*Seinssinn*] of play (9/14). However, Fink's ontological ambitions with play touch on the communal aspect of the phenomenon that support Dewey's educational and political concerns.[2] For example, Fink's account of the structure of play supports Dewey's idea that the best form of educational preparation is to always make the most of the present moment. To support this interpretative connection, I also draw on Dewey's arguments about preparation from his 1938 book *Experience and Education*.

2. Comparison of Some Shared Insights

Despite their distinct approaches to the phenomenon of play, there are many points of concurrence between Dewey and Fink. For example, recall the instance of two children at play in *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876) when Tom meets his friend in the woods, and they play Robin Hood. In this scene the two boys use toys and imagination to constitute what Fink calls a »playworld.« Such a world, as Fink says, is never merely imaginary since it relies on real things, ontic entities, i.e., toys or things that can serve as the jumping off point for the playworld, e.g., the actual forest becomes Sherwood Forest (22/25).

[2] John Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 2012, 213–216; John Dewey, *Schools of To-morrow*, Hawaii 2003, 114.

Dewey makes a similar point about the importance of toys insofar as they carry the activity of play forward.[3] The description of Tom playing also shows the distinction both philosophers make between playing with certain material equipment and the construction of dramatic plays. In dramatic play Fink and Dewey agree that though play is a manifestation of freedom it also follows rules, e.g., Tom corrects his friend's performance (20/23). Moreover, they both understand play to be a conserving activity. It is conserving because when children play it is a manifestation of their urge to imitate the adult world even if what they are imitating is fantasy. When Tom and his friend copy what they think adults do they are on the path of maturation and preparation. It is in this mimetic aspect of play that both Fink and Dewey understand play to be symbolic (25/27 and 28 f./30).[4]

Dewey understands play to be a ubiquitous human activity and so it is impossible for him to ignore its role in education.[5] Since few things appeal to students as much as play, engaging in play is vital to gaining what Dewey counts as knowledge. His educational goal is primarily guided by the idea that formal education should be a time where students learn by doing:[6] »It is the business of the school to set up an environment in which play and work shall be conducted with reference to facilitating desirable mental and moral growth.«[7] He emphasizes the activities of the school should not be »mere exercises for acquiring skill for future use« and should provide »immediate satisfaction […] together with preparation for later usefulness.«[8]

Though Fink also notes the possible pedagogical import of play in *Oasis of Happiness*, he is intent to go deeper than practical concern (13/17). What makes his philosophy of play distinct from Dewey's is his contention that a phenomenology of play can show it to be a of fundamental ontological significance for understanding human *being*. Fink repeatedly includes play in a group of existential features, i.e., working, ruling, being mortal and loving (14/18). For Fink play is a significant way of uniting these fundamental phenomena because in play we can play at all of these, »it stands *over and against*

[3] John Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 217.
[4] John Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 217.
[5] John Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 212; see also John Dewey, *Schools of To-morrow*, 105 f.
[6] John Dewey, *Schools of To-morrow*, 120.
[7] John Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 210.
[8] John Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 210.

them« (18/21). Fink pushes his inquiry to engage with as many aspects of human experience, culture, and history in a way that is not part of Dewey's engagement with play. For example, in *Oasis of Happiness* Fink engages with the »magical« many times and discusses the seductive role of masks to extend his analysis (cf. for the »*Magische*« 21, 25, 28, 29/23, 24, 25, 27, and for »*Maske*« 14, 18, 24/18, 22, 26).

3. The Ambiguity of Play

Both Dewey and Fink engage with the polysemous nature of play. For example, both discuss how play can mean the kind of imaginative activity of a child occupied with their toys. Each also recognizes that play carries the meaning of dramatization. Play is engagement in the production and performance of theatrical plays. For example, when Tom Sawyer plays with his friend in the woods, they exhibit the seamless connection between these two senses of play. They have their toys, rough approximations of real weapons which become props in their performance.

Dewey's chapter on play in *Schools of Tomorrow* is divided into an analysis of play in kindergarten which is characterized by activity with toys and their production. The rest of the chapter is about how the play of older children is dominated by drama. Dewey characterizes drama as playing with abstractions, i.e., ideas.[9] Fink switches between these two senses of play, but takes play itself as a way of being. »We play seriousness, play genuineness, play actuality, we play work and struggle, play love and death. And we even play play« (18/21). Fink seems to play with the ambiguity itself as it is not always clear exactly which sense he means, e.g., imaginative activity with playthings or drama.

Fink considers questions about play to be some of the greatest of philosophy because play is so ordinary (26/27). Dewey does not have any equivalent insight. What is so vital and provocative about Fink's interpretation of play is that he takes it, along with a small collection of other phenomena to be essential features that constitute human *being* (14/18). Because of the essentiality of play and its closeness to our being, it is difficult to analyze. Like all existential features of our

[9] John Dewey, *Schools of To-morrow*, 120.

being, it »shimmer[s] and appear[s] enigmatic in an ambiguous way« (15/19). For Fink even after a thorough categorization of play is complete and all its modes and manifestations are examined, it will still survive unexhausted because, »[p]lay is a phenomenon for which the appropriate categories do not easily and unambiguously present themselves« (24/26). Dewey does not explicitly discuss the ambiguity of play other than comparing the two types. His analysis does not consider the phenomenon to be as deep as Fink. A third sense of the meaning of play will be discussed later, which adds to the ambiguity of the phenomenon, but helps to show how the phenomenon can lead to the kind of ontological understanding that Fink seeks.

4. Play as Conserving

Fink and Dewey both regard the play of children as analogous to adulthood. In their attempt to copy adult behavior, children who are set up with space, toys, and time for play are dedicated to copying the world of adults. Dewey explains that the play of children is dominated by imaginatively working out adult activities on their own scale in a way that is within their capacities.[10] He says, »[a]ll little children think of playing house, doctor, or soldier, even if they are not given toys which suggest these games.«[11] Even though he does not explain it this way, it is interesting that some of Dewey's examples coincide with Fink's fundamental phenomena of our being, e.g., house relates to loving, doctor to working or ruling, and soldiering to ruling (*Herrschaft*) and mortality (25/27).

In *Democracy and Education* Dewey says, »[c]hildren are anxious to engage in the pursuits of adults which effect external changes.«[12] From an educational[13] perspective Dewey's analysis makes note of the distinct conservative quality of play and its power to inculcate modes of life.[14] In *Democracy and Education* Dewey defines all education as being to some degree conservative, i.e., something that has aspects of tradition and is a product of what those who have lived longer think is best. Because he is focused on the use of play in the educational

10 John Dewey, *Schools of To-morrow*, 123 f.
11 John Dewey, *Schools of To-morrow*, 108.
12 John Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 218.
13 John Dewey, *Schools of To-morrow*, 108.
14 John Dewey, *Schools of To-morrow*, 109.

domain, Dewey immediately notices that though the play of children is imitative, it is also preserving and perpetuating their way of being. The life of a child is a »replica of the life of his parents.«[15]

The conserving aspect of play is not fully explored by Dewey because he is only concerned with the educational aspect of play. Fink engages with the conserving feature of play only insofar as it relates to his discussion of the representational or mirroring quality of play as he pursues the ontological significance of the phenomenon. However, Fink's analysis shows that the child does not think of play in a conserving way, »[p]lay is conspicuously set apart from the whole futural character of life« (16/20). Children do not experience play as being necessarily imitative. The »serious absorption« required for »really playing« drives out such comparative notions in the mind of the child.[16] Whether some play is non-imitative is not addressed directly by either Dewey or Fink in these works.

The mimetic character of play makes the play of children, as opposed to that of adults, the emphasis for both philosophers. For Fink the examination of the play of children is primary because it is still »an intact sphere of existence," but in adults it is subordinated and distorted. »Seldom are adults able to play without inhibition« (13/17). Fink argues that the play of children reveals the essence of the phenomenon because adult play is more enigmatic and concealed (13 f./18). Dewey has a sequential scheme by which children become adults in part through play and has little to say about adult play itself, except as it relates to work, leisure, fooling, and drudgery.[17] One could say Dewey believes when children play they are learning about the flexibility of the adult realm, which relates to the ambiguity of play. If play is conserving what are adults copying when they play, children or perhaps God (29/27)?

It is in the conserving quality of play that a third meaning of play illuminates the polysemic character of the phenomenon. This sense of play is not directly addressed by either philosopher but helps to show how the phenomenon can reach to the ontological level that Fink seeks. When »play« is understood to mean »give« or »wiggle« as in the mechanical sense that there is »play in the hinge« or the gear »has a certain amount of play.« Heidegger makes much of the »es

15 John Dewey, *Schools of To-morrow*, 109.
16 John Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 218.
17 John Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 218 f.

gibt« (»there is«) formulation of the »to be« verb in German because of its connections to gratitude and how being is given to us. For example, in his essay »The Question Concerning Technology« Heidegger writes, »Every destining of revealing comes to pass from out of a granting […] it is granting that first conveys to man that share in revealing which the coming-to-pass of revealing needs.«[18] The »give« of the adult world which children play at in their imitation of that realm is part of how they come to understand their place in existence as beings-in-the-world. Play then in a double sense, in its ambiguous revealing, is how the young are educated into being. They play in the conserving sense, i.e., with toys and drama, but they also experience the play or give of being.

5. Conclusion: Preparation as Obtaining the Present

One crucial point of contact to emphasize between Fink's ontological concerns and Dewey's educational quest is their similar temporal teleological characterizations of play and how it relates to preparation. Fink explains that children do not experience play as imitative, because it is not experienced as having a »futural character« (16/20). Fink has another way of describing the non-futural character of play, it »has only internal purposes, not ones that transcend it« (17/20). Similarly, Dewey says, »[i]n play the activity is its own end, instead of its having an ulterior result.«[19] For this reason Dewey writes, »[p]lay is free, plastic.«[20] Fink says play is »plastic creativity« (9/14). This shared teleology of play shows how Fink's ontology of play supports Dewey's argument for how to regard the futurally oriented concept of preparation. For example, because of our sense of the future Fink says, »[w]e conceive the present as preparation« (16/19).

In *Democracy and Education*, Dewey makes this comment about preparation, »[t]he only sufficient preparation for later responsibilities come by making the most of immediately present life.«[21] He is making a point about how the futural character of life can intrude on the appropriate form of education that is necessary to prepare for what

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18 Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology*, trans. by William Lovitt, New York, 1977, 32.

19 John Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 216 f.

20 John Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 217.

21 John Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 329.

will happen. In his subsequent book *Experience and Education*, he examines the implications of using education as a means of preparation:

> What, then, is the true meaning of preparation in the educational scheme? In the first place, it means that a person, young or old, gets out of his present experience all that there is in it for him at the time in which he has it. When preparation is made the controlling end, then the potentialities of the present are sacrificed to a suppositious future. When this happens, the actual preparation for the future is missed or distorted. The ideal of using the present simply to get ready for the future contradicts itself. It omits, and even shuts out, the very conditions by which a person can be prepared for his future. We always live at the time we live and not at some other time, and only by extracting at each present time the full meaning of each present experience are we prepared for doing the same thing in the future. This is the only preparation which in the long run amounts to anything.[22]

Dewey's explanation of the flaws of educationally oriented preparation agrees with Fink's view that play takes us out of our common futural orientation and has only internal purposes. In so doing, play is an oasis or as Dewey puts it a »recuperation of energy.«[23] It is a possibility of our essence, an existential, that counteracts or relieves us of other dimensions of our essence, e.g., the work of seeking *eudaimonia*, ruling, loving and mortality (14, 15, 18/18, 21, 24). For education to prepare students, it must enter this oasis. The educative value of play is not necessarily, as Dewey observes, what is done during play, but rather the state of being itself that is entered into during play. The hoped-for results or value of education, just like play itself, cannot be sought or aimed at directly.

Fink's ontological analysis of play supports Dewey's argument about the true preparatory nature of education. In *Oasis of Happiness* Fink explores how our being, Dasein, as temporally structured, is always fragmentary (16/19). We live always trying to complete our being or at least understand it from a synoptic point of view. Play is done for its own sake and absorbs the players into the timeless moment not the »suppositious future« of our »Tantalus-like seeking« (17/20). We ceaselessly exist with this tension, always trying to complete what necessarily remains incomplete, but in play we attain

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22 John Dewey, *Experience and Education*, New York 1938, 49.
23 John Dewey, *Experience and Education*, 219.

what we seek, »[p]lay gives us the present […] Play is activity and creativity.« (17 f./21) To possess the present is to have the eternal life we seek and hope for as a heaven. However, as both philosophers recognize, we cannot enter into a fully harmonious earthly political order or divine realm if we are perpetually preparing for it.