

On Huizinga and Schiller: The Play Drive in Politics and Life

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I want to take a few minutes to introduce these two texts and then we will open it directly for discussion (since the two writers cannot be with us today). It may be useful to recall some of the main ideas in our two texts, before noting areas of convergence as well as divergence, which may serve as fodder for discussion.

Composed in 1794, Schiller's *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* navigate a treacherous triangle of ideas, a triangle whose three sides are drawn by politics, philosophy, and aesthetics. The problem Schiller means to address is explicitly political: it is the problem of the best means of "building," as he writes, "a true political freedom" (Letter 2). It is noteworthy which path Schiller does not take in outlining this building project: he declines to frame the problem of bringing about a free society through an analysis of the structure and causes of the actual servitude that enveloped him and his readers, an analysis that would presumably have revealed the path out of serfdom and towards freedom. Instead of the historical analysis we might expect, he relies on a frankly philosophical reflection that understands the obstacles to freedom to lie not with *this* king or *that* oligarchy, with *this* legal regime or *that* economic arrangement, but in two orders of necessity to which human beings are ineluctably subjected and that enter into conflict with one another.

One is the order of physical necessity. It is the order that couples the human body, via the senses, to the world and subjects human existence to constant material change. There is no duration here, just morphing sensation. The other is the order of reason, through which the human being attempts to master the flow of time by means of conceptually derived norms. It is not quite right to say that the human being is "subjected" to these two orders of necessity for he is fully integrated into them, fully participating in them. Thus Schiller hypothesizes what he calls drives (what our translation awkwardly calls "impulsions") to account for the ways in which we are embedded in these two orders and they in us. The material drive, or *Stofftrieb*, "makes man into matter," while the formal drive, or *Formtrieb*, "asserts his person through all change in his state of being" (Letter 12).

Schiller is a clear enough thinker to realize that these two orders and their corresponding drives do not—and indeed cannot—stand in opposition to one another. Only a superficial understanding would think that material sensation and law-giving reason are two engines of the mind working at cross purposes. In truth, as Schiller conceives of them, they are two gears: gears that fail to mesh and so spin independent of one another. True, Schiller concedes, these drives propel us in opposite directions, but because they work on fundamentally different objects—one on matter, the other on the mind; one as a fundamentally receptive capacity, the other as fundamentally productive—they cannot trip each other up. That is the good news. The bad news is that the failure of the gears to engage means that they remain in neutral; they don't actually get us anywhere. The formal drive that gives us the moral law and thus the prescription of a life lived freely never manages to get a grip on the material world in which this freedom must be lived. The results are lopsided. When the material drive has the upper hand, we live the life of a savage, says Schiller; when, on the other hand, the formal drive imposes its draconian will

without regard for the needs of sensation, we find the barbarian. Neither case furthers the cause of freedom.

The talk of spinning gears is Schiller's, not mine, and it conveys some of his deepest political commitments. In the third Letter he reminds us of the difficulty of the task by comparing the work of political change to repairing a watch. The watch maker stops the watch before replacing the faulty gears, "but," he writes, "the living clockwork of the state must be repaired while it beats, and the task here is to exchange the rolling gear while it swings" (Letter 3). We understand how to read this: while the French revolutionaries brought the machinery of the state to a standstill and only then proceeded to exchange its parts, resetting the clock of history, Schiller's project will consist in a seamlessly elegant repair job. You won't even notice it happened.

This is where he turns to the third side of the conceptual triangle: aesthetics. If philosophy helped articulate what ails politics, it is aesthetics that is called upon to heal it. "I hope to convince you," Schiller writes in the very first of the Letters, "that to solve that political problem in experience, one must take the path through the aesthetic, for it is through beauty that one approaches freedom" (Letter 1). As we learn in the letters reproduced in our reader, the name Schiller gives the project of healing the political rift through an aesthetic practice is the play drive. This drive, he tells us, receives sensation as though it manufactured it, and gives form as it would receive it (Letter 14). This drive places us in a "happy medium between law and need," for the mind at play finds itself subjected to neither an external nor an internal necessity (Letter 15). In fact, it is not subjected to any kind of necessity. Hence the very distinction of contingency and necessity disappears and with it the privative force necessity has for us. All this culminates in the claim that because we are entirely free in play and in play alone, the human being is only fully human where he plays (Letter 15).

The function of the play drive is, then, essentially conciliatory and harmonizing. It aims for the happy medium and the right balance. It is here that we can identify the most consequential differences with the conception of play that Johan Huizinga articulates in *Homo Ludens*. The differences are not to be found in any list of features that one thinker may include under the heading of "play" while the other would exclude it, but rather in the very status of the object of study itself. Play, for Schiller, is a normative concept, and doubly so. It is supposed to bring about a certain outcome and is there folded into a cultural technology called education. But what constitutes play itself is normative as well. "We must not indeed think of the games that are in vogue in real life," Schiller admonishes us. "The ideal beauty, established by reason, demands an ideal of the play drive, which the human being should have before himself in all his playing" (Letter 15).

This double norm—what play is supposed to be like, and what play is supposed to achieve—marks the conceptual distance from Huizinga's project, which understands itself, above all, *descriptively*. What is play? "Well, let's look around and observe all the behaviors we might designate with this word and, lo, there are many of them." It is part of the power of Huizinga's study to have registered the perplexity and awe of the explorer who finds that the island he thought he had hit upon actually has the size and complexity of a continent. This is big, he tells himself (and us), much bigger than I can handle.

Still, our reading of Schiller allows us to recognize certain areas of overlap and commonality that may help us in conceptualizing play across time, space, and social practice. Here are three such areas:

1. Though Huizinga's concept of play is so capacious that virtually all humans and many animals engage with it, while Schiller's so narrowly idealized that virtually no human being can be said to partake of it, they both insist that play exceed the economy of life. "In play," Huizinga tells us on the very first page of his study, "there is something 'at play' which transcends the immediate needs of life" (1). Or, more ambitiously still, he declares: "Play only becomes possible, thinkable, and understandable when an influx of mind breaks down the absolute determinism of the cosmos" (3). Play, then, compels to introduce a logic beyond that of the determinism of life processes.

2. Wherein lies this excess over and above "the immediate needs of life"? It is difficult to say. For Schiller it lies in the motion that reconciles the demands of reason and of sensibility in the lived form of freedom. Huizinga loads this up with language that is not as high-minded but may be no less metaphysically freighted: he speaks of a zone of meaning opening up in play. "All play means something," he asserts (1).

3. What can we say about this meaning that is in play in play? Both Schiller and Huizinga are adamant that it belongs neither in the sphere of logic and cognition nor in the sphere of ethics but, rather, in aesthetics. Though Huizinga claims uncertainty about play's kinship with aesthetics ("here our judgment wavers," he confesses (7)), the list of determinations he proceeds to provide comes directly out of a tradition of aesthetic thought to which Schiller himself is indebted, namely Kant's conception of aesthetics. When Huizinga tells us that play is free, disinterested, and framed, he might as well have given us the features of the Kantian beautiful.