

Character and . . .

Play

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The faculty essays presented here emerge from a semester-long process of reading and writing together in an environment of critique and review. Nevertheless, this invited journal of essays represents the authors' views and not necessarily the views of the Wendt Center for Character Education or the University of Dubuque.

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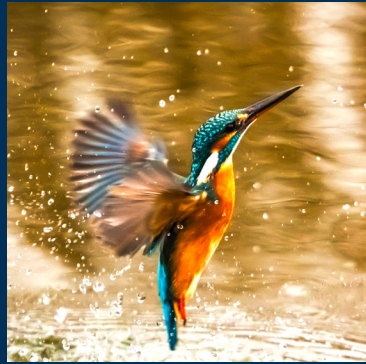
Character and Play

Worth Playing Together

Annalee R. Ward

As Kingfishers Catch Fire By Gerard Manley Hopkins

As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies dráw fláme;
As tumbled over rim in roundy wells
Stones ring; like each tucked string tells, each hung bell's
Bow swung finds tongue to fling out broad its name;
Each mortal thing does one thing and the
same:
Deals out that being indoors each one
dwells;
Selves—goes itself; myself it speaks and
spells,
Crying *Whát I do is me: for that I came.*



Í say móre: the just man justices;
Kéeps gráce: thát keeps all his goings
graces;
Acts in God's eye what in God's eye he is—
Christ—for Christ plays in ten thousand places,
Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his
To the Father through the features of men's faces.

Gerard Manley Hopkins' poem may sound strange to our twenty-first century ears. His phrases and use of language call for second and third reads to figure out the meaning. Yet one phrase speaks plainly: "for Christ plays in ten thousand places."

That phrase encapsulates shades of meaning, including that Christ shows up and speaks in both nature and humanity. In a contemporary slant, think of it as a headliner cross-world tour: *Christ is playing at a site near you!* In the “10,000 places,” Christ doesn’t just perform—he also “plays”—that is, expresses creativity and delight in extraordinary and surprising faces and places, shows up in a variety of spectacles. Christ living in people, created in the image of God, affirms the delightful diversity in humanity.

The positivity and joy that play brings to people—young and old—sets the stage for experiences that often transport us. Consider for a moment, what comes to mind when you hear the word *play*. I am whisked back to childhood memories of swinging so high I could touch the deep blue sky of the west, where I grew up.



Memories of play under the deep blue sky

I see neighborhood children racing bikes, playing make-believe, marbles, and made-up games. I watch my brothers disassemble roller skates to create their very own skateboards. I smile in the memories. But of course, the darker sides of that play dissipate with distance—the being left out, the accidents, the intrusiveness of lived lives, illnesses, parental woes impinging on that sacred space of play. Yet, somehow, the spirit of play shaped who we were (and are) and how we responded to the realities back then (and now).

This volume of essays begins to explore the ways in which play intersects with character formation both as an action and as an attitude. Emerging from the crises of a pandemic brought us a longing for freshness, a longing for lightness, a longing for play. With that recognition, our authors quickly settled on the subject as one that would be both instructive and delightful to explore.

The wide range of play-related topics may surprise you, but that diversity only highlights the heuristic power the term *play* has. For example, how is it possible to have a translator/media producer, a musician, a cultural historian, and a research scientist write on the same subject? By taking a broad understanding of play as action and attitude, we are able to employ the concept as a prism through which varied interests and expertise

examine a particular hue of the concept. Using common readings, including Johan Huizinga’s classic *Homo Ludens*, to provide the shape of our prism means we began this journal volume with a triangulated conversation between play, virtue, and particular applications. Authors “played” with terms from their unique standpoints.



Children at play

Play and Character

While research on the subject of play grows,¹ limited explorations of its relationship to character exist. The noteworthy *Handbook on Character Strengths and Virtues* suggests there might be a link between good character and humor or playfulness, but this remains more suggestion than researched quality.

Play theorist Stuart Brown, founder of The National Play Institute, goes so far as to say, “Play is the vital essence of life. It is what makes life lively.”² It helps us “harness a force that has been built into us through millions of years of evolution, a force that allows us to both discover our most essential selves and enlarge our world. We are designed to find fulfillment and creative growth through play.”³ As it is a significant force in life, perhaps we need to take play seriously and consider how it may relate to our character.

We need to take play seriously and consider how it may relate to our character.



Dogs at play

To do that, I begin with a reminder from animals. Mark Bekoff, a professor of ecology and evolutionary biology has spent most of his career studying animals. He argues that different species exhibit morality—be it related to cooperation, empathy, or justice—behavior that is often illustrated as they play.⁴ That animals exhibit in their play what

we consider to be virtuous behavior suggests that we should look at human play for its connections to morality, as human animals are innately moral beings—endowed with the capacity for good and evil, virtue and vice, yet always bearing an etching of God. Returning to Hopkins’ poem, we see that Christ is playing in moral beings—people living in the grace of God, capable of practicing justice. Play activity provides opportunities for virtue development and expression.

Nevertheless, play and humor may not rise to the top when one thinks of virtuous character. On the other hand, as an auxiliary virtue—one tied to other virtues—playfulness shines. Play enhances life with a dimension of joy and hopefulness. A summative chart that the National Institute for Play created highlights qualities that are especially enriched by play, describing what life looks like with and without them. Notice how many are intertwined with virtues.

<i>When Life is . . .</i>	<i>Play-filled</i>	<i>Play-Deprived</i>
<i>Trust</i>	<i>Life is experienced as a playground filled with chances to learn</i>	<i>Life is experienced as a proving ground—and often a battleground</i>
<i>Flexibility</i>	<i>Change brings exploration and new possibilities</i>	<i>Change creates fear and resistance</i>
<i>Optimism</i>	<i>Well-being and pleasure are expected</i>	<i>Discomfort and disappointment are expected</i>
<i>Problem-Solving</i>	<i>Problems are acknowledged and often foster skill development</i>	<i>Problems are hidden, denied, or avoided</i>
<i>Emotional Regulation</i>	<i>Stress is handled with resilience; the response is most often stability</i>	<i>Stress responses are often anger, rage, or withdrawal caused by low self-efficacy</i>
<i>Perseverance</i>	<i>Motivation is sustained from internal drive, mastery is sought</i>	<i>Motivation dissipates; equivocation, procrastination, and apathy arise</i>
<i>Empathy</i>	<i>Others’ feelings are recognized; support is often offered</i>	<i>Others’ feelings are not recognized; discord occurs</i>
<i>Openness</i>	<i>Life is vital; a strong sense of belonging fosters social cooperation</i>	<i>Life is dull; people become socially withdrawn, often with mild depression</i>
<i>Belonging</i>	<i>Behaviors are altruistic, leading to teamwork, community creation, and participation</i>	<i>Behaviors are callous, uncooperative, bullying, and self-centered</i>

Chart created by National Institute for Play⁵

While not all of these qualities are necessarily considered virtues, many are. Perseverance, empathy, altruism, and resilience, for example, especially contribute to good moral character. Other virtues could be added to expand this chart, as aspects of justice and civility are also inherent in good play.

Whether or not play is an expression of virtue, stands alongside of virtues while enhancing their growth, or acts as the ground on which they “play,” it is clear that character should be considered when we discuss play. What is not clear, however, is whether we are all operating from the same definition in this volume.

Characterizing Play

Delineating what we mean by *play*, it turns out, challenges scholars to such diverse work that there is no simple definition. That may sound odd, but let us consider the breadth of meanings *play* has. We begin with parts of

speech. Is *play* a noun as in “that was a tricky play” or “we watched a play” or “let’s go outside to the playground” or “push play”? Or is it a verb holding numerous meanings, from children’s frolics to goofing around, to an attitude, to performance, to participation in sports, to cooperating in a group activity, to manipulation—and these are only some of the ways we use the word.⁶



Play on the playground

Johan Huizinga, a scholar of cultural history, argues that play is “a free activity standing . . . outside ‘ordinary’ life as being ‘not serious,’ but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly.” It holds “no material interest, and no profit. . . .” Other characteristics show it has “its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner. It promotes the formation of social groupings. . . .”⁷ Huizinga’s definition of play as profitless contradicts the positivity of social connections. When we bring in the moral realm, we see the power of play to augment virtues like compassion and justice in social settings.

Building on Huizinga’s work, Brown defines play as “an absorbing, apparently purposeless activity that provides enjoyment and a suspension of self-consciousness and sense of time. It is also self-motivating and makes you

want to do it again.”⁸ Brown argues that its meaning is so varied and is such a “primal activity”⁹ that any specific definition threatens to “take the joy out of it.”¹⁰ Even as we look at the qualities in his definition, exceptions pop to mind. What about playing games with educational purposes? What about mandatory gym class games? What if I don’t like a game and don’t want to play? The exceptions continue yet some generalizations make sense despite the exceptions, and all of these properties begin to suggest a bounding definition even if that boundary is porous. Nevertheless, argues scholar Peter Gray, the attitude of play may exist more on a continuum than a simple on/off experience as motivations and experiences of play can be mixed with mindsets of work or negative emotions.¹¹

Ambiguity is the word that Brian Sutton-Smith, another scholar of play, uses to address the diversity of definitions and approaches to studying play.¹² Using multiple disciplines and a lens of rhetorical studies, he examines words and studies that surround play rather than assuming a simple, direct definition and describes studies around play as an “omnibus” area of study—it’s huge!¹³

What that means is there is room for exploration—for play even—in the boundaries of our topic. For, notes Brown, “Play, by its very nature, is a little anarchic. It is about stepping outside of normal life and breaking normal patterns. It is about bending rules of thought, action, and behavior.”¹⁴ The difficulties of defining play also emerge from the fact that play is both *action* and *attitude*. We will see this at work in the articles in this issue.

Play is both action and attitude.

Character and . . . Play Essays

Mary Bryant’s essay, “Gameplay and Human Flourishing,” is the one article focusing on the *action* of play. She expands the relationship to character in broad ways, arguing that play, particularly gameplay, contributes to human flourishing by growing social engagement, providing opportunities to steward one’s integrity, and offering learning opportunities. Her essay addresses the action of play most



D&D, a common sort of social gameplay

directly as she explores what gameplay contributes not just to our well-being, but also to our character formation, particularly in its social nature. Virtuous play has the power to grow qualities of compassion, patience, civility, and justice.¹⁵ Taking up the nagging question of productivity in use of time, she leads us on a nuanced study of why games matter in a well-lived life,¹⁶ especially when play is monitored by moderation.¹⁷

Bryant’s essay focused on actual gameplay, but the next essays look at the *attitude* of play employed in performance, social navigation, and scientific research.



Place for play and hospitality

For Kristen Eby, an attitude of playfulness and hospitality combine to make performances excellent and enjoyable for both performer and audience. In her article, “Performance, Play, and Hospitality,” the artist in Eby evidences in how she weaves her argument with grace, a style that illustrates what she is calling for in performance. Too often our experience with performance—either as performer or audience—is framed by a celebrity mindset in a consumer environment. Focusing on play and hospitality as key components changes the experience into a more hopeful one, centering the joy of art and inviting us all to participate in ways that make us better humans.



Sol Butler, star athlete at Dubuque College

To navigate the potential dark side of humanity, play becomes a critical survival tool, argues Brian Hallstoos in “Diffusing Racism: Olympian Sol Butler’s Serious Playfulness.” While the action of play oriented much of Sol Butler’s life, his attitude of playfulness is the focus of Hallstoos’ article. Hallstoos remedies history’s neglect of a remarkable person whose achievements, especially in athletics, demonstrate what a rare and gifted person he was, but here Hallstoos helps us move beyond athletic achievements solely (which are monumental) to consider his character.

An ambitious young Black man (who wrote a book to help him in his college application process¹⁸), Butler, evidenced in old photographs, played a central role in the campus social life. In addition to being the star athlete on almost every team, including quarterbacking the football team all four years, he liked to have fun. He liked to play. But for Butler, that play carried nuances which helped him navigate the racism of the era. The activity of play was crucial for giving Butler access to education, but his attitude of playfulness helped him succeed both on and off the fields and courts of competition.

The focus on scientific research in the final article might be surprising, as scientific research connotes rigor, discipline, and replicability. One might imagine no room exists for play if it is to be work that is taken seriously. Adam Kleinschmit, in “Transformative Discovery Science: Character and Play as Key Elements,” counters that assumption. As a scientist himself, he faces the current pressures for pursuit of funding and projects which will continue the cycle of interest in funding and publishing the material. Sometimes scientists succumb to those pressures, engaging in unethical behavior or work in order to enhance their reporting. But using examples from history and his conference experiences with agar art, Kleinschmit highlights the potential for discovery science. This kind of science best occurs when an attitude of playfulness allows researchers a more free-ranging tinkering—a kind of playing—where outcomes are not necessarily spelled out and narrowly focused on the replicable. Coupled with an emphasis on good character, on integrity, the unrealized and undeveloped ideas become possible, leading to transformative discoveries.



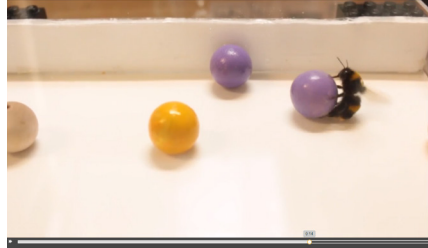
Agar art—a melding of science and play

Our respondent, Naaman Wood, illustrates how the social concern over the role colonialism has played in our country’s history and its challenges to justice intersect with considerations of play and character. He takes these essays on their own terms but then urges them forward toward a telos of justice, noting that their serious engagement with play helps point to a better world. He masterfully weaves his concerns for being more Other-centered with the topic of play. Play, while initially thought of as lighthearted, has potential to carry the weight of seeing a better world. His

work brings this issue's wrestling with Huizinga's "profitlessness" of play to a place of deep moral significance.

Benefits of Play

We observe play in the natural world—creatures¹⁹ and humans. It is endemic to our natures and necessary, notes Brown, to our "neural evolution," promoting "the creation of new connections," a safe arena for testing, and a "penalty-free rehearsal of the normal give-and-take necessary in social groups."²⁰ Affective neuroscientist Jaak Panksepp identifies play as one of our core emotional systems that instigates joy.²¹ We play because it is built into our beings, but we also play because it is fun, pleasurable. It can be relaxing and yet energizing. It can take us out of time, out of present worries. Play can help form friendships and form social connections.



Video of a bee playing with a wooden ball

The built-in nature of play, Robert Johnston argues, comes from its being part of the creational order as rest from work. When God finished God's days of creating, God rested. The gift and rhythm of Sabbath, of regular rest from work, brings restoration and glory to God as we practice what might superficially be called "useless" activity.²² "Entered into freely and joyfully, it [Sabbath] has its rules and order for the sake of its integrity . . . for the sake of playing the 'game.'"²³ God has designed us for play, not just work.

Play (in balance with work) is enjoyable—joy bringing. The change of pace can also be creative. Brown comments, "When we play, dilemmas and challenges will naturally filter through the unconscious mind and work themselves out. It is not at all uncommon for people to come back not only reenergized, but also with fresh ideas for work."²⁴ Brown's enthusiasm for play is contagious.

The benefits of play for character are real. Brown speaks to the social element Bryant highlights, noting how it is interwoven with the moral realm. He emphasizes benefits such as "cooperative socialization," and its power to build "trust, empathy, caring, and sharing." Games have the power to "set the foundation for our understanding of fairness and justice."²⁵

Despite the association of play with children, adults need play in their lives too. It continues to provide equipment for living. For example, notes Brown, “Play gives us the irony to deal with paradox, ambiguity, and fatalism.”²⁶ Play serves to bring light to dark moods, to enrich times and places with joyful fun, and to divert attention from daily worries and concerns.



Playtime for all ages

Bryant expands the understanding of play's benefits. She notes that play may even impact our health for the better reducing stress, building relationships, and contributing to our education. The hopefulness and positivity embedded in play contributes to human flourishing, she argues convincingly. Play impacts attitudes, socialization, character formation, mental and physical health. Yet despite all the good inherent in play, we cannot conclude without some caution.

Modern life often delineates play from work. That perspective, moving beyond the attitude of playfulness to the action, does presume the privilege of time and means to make a space for play, to be able to afford play. When someone is so exhausted from work, play can be a luxury. When someone



God has designed us for play, not just work.

is struggling to get their basic needs met, play's seeming unproductivity can appear to be a negative. And when done to excess, life falls out of balance, and it does become an unproductive vice.

While play might enhance good character or provide character practice space, Brian Sutton-Smith, in *The Ambiguity of Play*, cautions that play is not strictly an innocent activity. At times playfulness degenerates into cruelty, another vice. Other times dark fantasies take play into disturbing places.²⁷ Perhaps leaning into Aristotle's preference for the middle way, the moderation between extremes, needs to be held congruently with the idea that character and play complement each other.

We hope you enjoy these essays as conversation starters on how play might contribute to good character and help us flourish. The spirit of playfulness infused in our lives—leisure and games or work—holds great promise for working with virtues like hospitality to bring joy to performances for

performer and audience. And that spirit of playfulness, which may seem childishly light, has potential power to free us from sometimes unproductive confrontations so that we can come at issues such as racism and colonialism from a “side door,” which ultimately may break down more walls than directness. Finally, that spirit of playfulness maintained in our work, particularly our scientific research, allows for creativity and discovery that more narrowly determined attitudes and actions may preclude. Character and play—worth playing together.

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p. 7: photo by Mary K. Bryant

p. 8: (Sol Butler and his trophies) *The 1919 Key*, p. 191

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Notes

1. See the Summer 2021 Theme Issue: Play in *Christian Scholar’s Review* for a similarly diverse set of essays on the topic from a Christian standpoint

2. Brown, *Play*, 12.

3. Brown, 13.

4. Bekoff and Pierce, *Wild Justice*, 1, xiv, xii, 6.

5. “Play Science.”

6. *Merriam-Webster.com*, s.v. “play,” <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/play> (accessed July 10, 2023).

7. Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 13.

8. Brown, *Play*, 60.
9. Brown, 15.
10. Brown, 16.
11. Gray, *Free to Learn*, 140.
12. After highlighting a variety of rhetorics, functions, forms, values, and disciplinary scholarship, Sutton-Smith concludes that there are multiple definitions of play. He tries to encompass those when he calls play “the potentiation of adaptive variability.” See *Ambiguity of Play*, 231.
13. Sutton-Smith, *Ambiguity of Play*, vii,viii, 3.
14. Brown, *Play*, 193.
15. Bryant, “Gameplay and Human Flourishing,” 18, 20-21.
16. Philosopher Bernard Suits took this “contribution to flourishing” argument to an extreme in *The Grasshopper* and subsequent *Return of the Grasshopper* where he argues that all of life is a game.
17. Bryant, “Gameplay and Human Flourishing,” 25.
18. Butler and Butler, *Three Years of High School Athletics*.
19. London, “Astonishing Experiment”; Galpayage Dona et al., “Do Bumble Bees Play?”
20. Brown, *Play*, 41, 42, 32.
21. Panksepp, *Affective Neuroscience*.
22. Johnston, *Christian at Play*, 83–95.
23. Johnston, 93.
24. Brown, *Play*, 128.
25. Brown, 198.
26. Brown, 201–2.
27. Sutton-Smith, *Ambiguity of Play*, 133–34, 56 151.

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