

Hermeneutics of Play

The Absent Structure

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ABSTRACT: In several philosophical traditions, play is supposed to express a (methodological, ontological) state of non–foundedness. I retrace the philosophical function of play in the hermeneutic tradition as it has been developed by Ast, Boeckh, Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger, and Gadamer. I also refer to important parallels in Derrida and Wittgenstein. Those philosophers identify ‘play’ as a sort of ‘style’ that is not necessarily empirically present, but which can still be ‘seen.’ I contrast this intellectual model with Gehlen’s anthropology of games. Play as an ‘absent’ (stylistic) concept is compared to the idea of the ‘absent structure’ in structuralism.

KEYWORDS: Philosophy of play, hermeneutics, structuralism, Huizinga, Gadamer.

L’art est un jeu. Tant pis pour
celui qui s’en fait un devoir.

Max Jacob

I. Introduction

In several philosophical traditions, *Spiel*, *jeu* and game are supposed to express a (methodological, ontological) state of non–foundedness by means of which foundational, metaphysical ways of thinking are reviewed or overcome. Theories of non–foundation are not new. The Socratic refutation of the *techné* says quite clearly what is not true but leaves wide open any positive definition of terms like ‘knowledge’ or ‘the good.’ Socrates founds an entire theory of knowledge on (a kind of holy) non–knowledge. Hegel’s conception of *Weltgeschichte* (world history) as the manifestation of a *Geist* exposes some of the main characteristics of philosophical definitions of the *game* as a model of non–foundation: the *Geist* of history is absolute self–reflexivity or self–consciousness (*Selbstbewusstsein*) whose condition is absolute liberty. The consciousness which is merely itself (which has

already found itself) strives for nothing and is thus free and unfree at the same time. Circular, gamelike structures of philosophical thinking appear also in Nietzsche and Heidegger who have characterized the history of philosophy as the symmetrical reversals of metaphysics, Christian versions of Platonism, historical theories or any ideologies.

Hans–Georg Gadamer introduces the notion of *Spiel* (play or game)¹ in relationship with Heidegger’s ideas on the hermeneutic circle. Gadamer’s hermeneutics is determined by the notion of ‘historicity’ (*Geschichtlichkeit*) claiming that within every process of understanding we are constantly referred back to our own historical position. The process of understanding is deprived of its (theoretical or methodological) ground and understanding can look like a game. The game as a philosophical model is supposed to represent the state of non–foundedness because it serves as the ground of what cannot be grounded otherwise, as it has been expressed by Eugen Fink: “The lack of a point of view can stimulate the human play drive: reason, sense, and end will be grasped through the metaphor of the game.” (Fink 1960: 157, my translation)

2. What is a Game?

Huizinga’s definition from the *Homo Ludens* has become the arguably most classical definition of play or game: “Play is a voluntary activity or occupation executed within certain fixed limits of time and place, according to rules freely accepted but absolutely binding, having its aim in itself and accompanied by a feeling of tension, joy, and the consciousness that it is

1. The distinction the English language makes between *play* and *game* presents problems for this article. What non–English authors like Gadamer, Huizinga, Derrida and Wittgenstein call *Spiel* or *jeu* cannot consistently be translated as either *game* or *play*. Both in the English translation of Gadamer’s *Wahrheit und Methode*, by G. Barden and J. Cumming, and in Huizinga’s own English translation of *Homo Ludens*, the word *Spiel* (or *spel*, in Dutch) is translated as *play*. Equally, Derrida’s *jeu* in *La Structure, le signe et le jeu dans le discours des sciences humaines* (in *L’écriture et la différence*) has been translated by Alan Bass with *play*. In English the distinction between game and play is neither very clear nor much reflected in theoretical literature. Edward B. Tylor in his *Primitive Culture* (1891) puts forward the fact that to play a game is something all participants of the game must have agreed to, whereas a play can also be played against the will of some participants. One can be played with but one cannot be ‘gamed with.’ Mary Midgley writes that Huizinga’s *Homo Ludens* “concerns Play in general, but including Games, and [Huizinga’s] point is that Play is an essential element in all highly regarded human activities.” (Midgley 1974: 241) Here, Game is conceived as a sub–category of play, which is certainly consistent in regard to Huizinga’s book. However, on further scrutiny the distinction between play and game can turn out to be a fallacy. Midgley’s main point is that games can be considered as games only when being conceived as games by the people who play them. All other human activities which are not games in the proper sense but in which we can observe some gamelike moment must be called play. However, what are we doing when we ‘see play’ in those activities? We see them *as games*. Game and play are not different in regard to their essence but appear as a doublet.

‘different’ from ‘ordinary life’.” (Huizinga 1970: 57–58) The game has ‘lightness,’ it fascinates through its superiority towards any finality and adopts an apparently indifferent attitude towards ‘real life,’ and the feeling of tension and joy together with the consciousness of being ‘free’ from daily life produces a certain state of mind that Friedrich Schiller previously characterized as the ‘lightness’ of the game.² The game, since it is totally liberated from any end, cannot be troubled, in the words of Eugen Fink, “by a fundamental incertitude.” (Fink 1960: 180, my translation) Huizinga provides a list of necessary qualities of games. (Huizinga 1970: 66) They must:

- a) be voluntary;
- b) be executed within certain fixed limits of time and place;
- c) follow rules freely accepted;
- d) follow rules which are absolutely binding;
- e) be provided with an end in itself;
- f) be accompanied by a feeling of tension and joy;
- g) ensure the consciousness of being different from ordinary life.

The self-sufficiency of the game, which refers every philosophical grounding back to itself in a circular fashion, produces a lightness settling down right within the tension between superficiality (the fact of having no profound ground) and profoundness (the fact of having no superficial ground), in order to free itself once and for all from all determinations of philosophical grounding.

Systematizations of game like the one provided by Piaget (1978), who distinguishes between ‘spontaneous games’ (games without link with the social world) and ‘institutionalized games’ (games partly controlled by social factors), claim to trace some games back to ‘spontaneity’ and others to ‘motives.’ Piaget’s system is inspired by Freud’s distinction between *Lustprinzip* (pleasure principle) and *Realitätsprinzip* (reality principle): games of the *Lustprinzip* lean towards an immediate satisfaction in being completely independent from reality whereas games of the *Realitätsprinzip* adapt partly to reality. However, the latter do so not because they are concerned by ‘real action,’ but because they try to modify their relationship towards reality or to ‘assimilate reality to them.’ Piaget’s example is that of a child who repeatedly conjures up dangerous experiences, trying to deprive those situations of their precarious character. Piaget concludes: “I can reduce the game to a search for pleasure but only on the condition that this search will be seen as subordinated to the assimilation of the real to the *I*. Ludic pleasure

2. Schiller writes in the fragment *Der Geisterseher* about a pantomime dance of young boys and girls: “Leichtigkeit und Grazie beseelten jede Bewegung.” (Schiller 1824: 120)

would thus be the affective expression of this assimilation.” (Piaget 1978: 156, my translation) Still, Piaget’s explanations do not answer the question ‘Why do people play?’ In spontaneous games he observes a moment of spontaneity that can be perceived from a distanced point of view outside the game while inside the game everything is well founded and *nothing* is merely spontaneous. Even pleasure is not a positive quality in games because, strictly speaking, pleasure does not exist in the players but only in the game. The pleasure is not produced by the player’s consciousness, but it develops independently. Gadamer, when seeking to free the concept of play from its subjective meaning in philosophy since Kant, insists that the player herself cannot inform us about this surplus that makes the game a game: “Play has its own essence, independent of the consciousness of those who play,” and we cannot find an answer to the nature of play “if we look for it in the player’s subjective reflection.” (Gadamer 2004: 103)

Piaget’s ‘reality principle’ does not explain the existence of games either. The triumph of the winner of the game is an internal triumph which cannot be measured with ‘present’ categories of the ‘real’ social or historical world. Even games of imitation and *make-believe* get their attractiveness not from their perfect correspondence with reality but — like the real mimesis of the good mime — from an inner correspondence with themselves: games are ‘good games’ if they are ‘real games.’

The model of mimesis/imitation as a typical function of play has been of particular interest for Derrida who detects a clear pattern of non–foundation in the game of mimesis: “The mime imitates nothing. And to begin with, he does not imitate. There is nothing prior to the writing of his gestures. Nothing is prescribed for him [. . .], he does not obey any verbal order,” says Derrida about the mime. (Derrida 2004: 194–195) The mime does not *follow* a script nor does he write his own script. In a way, he does ‘imitate’ but he does not imitate *something*. He does not think of his activity as an imitation, he does not *think* that right now he imitates *this* or *that*. This is exactly what the Swiss anthropologist Gustav Bally established in 1945 when writing about the relationship between playing and thinking: “In play there is no indication of a duality of action in the sense of premeditations like ‘I will do this’ or ‘now I do that’.” (Bally 1945: 19, my translation). According to Bally, all we find within the auto–motive activity of the game is a certain mood or attunement (*Stimmung*) created by every game within its own limits; and this mood decides how the game is perceived by the player. The German phrase ‘Ein Spiel spielen’ repeats the noun to express the ‘what’ of the corresponding verb, a rare phenomenon of linguistic self–sufficiency which has fascinated Gadamer when reading Huizinga (Gadamer 2004: 162, fn. 6). There is something inside the game that can only be captured from this very inside, but which cannot be grasped by means of empirical

observations or philosophical systematizations because it is a matter neither of objective rules nor of the player's subjectivity.

This is one of the reasons why purely empirical descriptions of games are limited. The failure of such attempts becomes particularly clear in the work of Arnold Gehlen who attempted to define games and their involvement in social behavior. Through a particular 'anthropobiological' approach, Gehlen attempts to put Max Scheler's and Helmut Plessner's 'philosophical anthropology on an empirical ground. Gehlen's empirical approach can be seen as diametrically opposed to Huizinga's philosophical one. Gehlen observes circular developments within all sorts of socializing processes, which leads him in his main work, *Der Mensch* (1940), to the development of a full-fledged 'theory of play.' Gehlen explains that gamelike structures can be found in the intellectual development of young children and provides an empirical description of circular patterns of actions and stimuli: "Here, a movement of the legs produced a particular sensation in the soles of the feet which then functioned as the stimulus for a continuation of the movement: the movement furnished the incentive for its own repetition." (Gehlen 1988: 122–123) It is true that the circularity is similar to the state of self-sufficiency experienced in a game: "In the sensorimotor circular processes, interaction with a part of the world provides the impetus for its continuation; the movement takes on a value of its own that spurs its further development and finds gratification in its own vitality." (Gehlen 1988: 125) Gehlen recognizes that there is still another surplus in the game: "The behavior of jumping balls on the roulette wheel, the chance distribution of colorful cards, etc., constitute the truly recreational or stimulating aspect of play and encourage active participation in objectively meaningless, random events. The simple redistribution of money is not a satisfying game in itself. . ." (Gehlen 1988: 193) However, Gehlen also decides to reduce this surplus to an empirical fact: "[Play] must involve ceremony, risk-taking, rules, colorful or stimulating objects, and often even special clothing." (Gehlen 1988: 193) The problem is that any empirical definition of games has to end here and that any further experiential surplus will be defined as merely "imagined, unstable interests, which are divorced from needs." Gehlen ascribes those interests to the fact that the human being is not as specialized as the animal and cannot always give specific directions to her actions. (Gehlen 1988: 194) In other words, Gehlen eliminates from his agenda of anthropobiologism all those unstable interests that lend games their paradoxical ontological foundation and which have fascinated Huizinga, Fink, Bally, and Gadamer.

3. Liberty and Presence

Cultural anthropologist Roger Caillois places being free in first place among his six qualities defining game: “1. free, 2. separated, 3. uncertain, 4. unproductive, 5. rule–following, 6. fictional.” (Caillois 1967: 101) Huizinga’s conception of the liberty of games is more subtle than Caillois’s since it points to a paradoxical moment within the formation of liberty. Huizinga’s formulation that play “follows rules freely accepted but absolutely binding” shows that “liberty in games” is different from liberty we encounter in real life. Where in real life we agree on certain rules, we do it either voluntarily (in which case the act of following those rules will be voluntary as well); or the rules have been imposed upon us, in which case the act of following those rules will also be a matter of force. In games, on the other hand, liberty has another status: the playing of a certain game must be voluntarily agreed upon, but once the game is played, all liberty towards rules will have to be cancelled. Only the philosophical distinction between inside and outside (the distinction which the game strives to cancel) can crystallize two distinct moments, once of liberty and then of force. To play or not to play: this decision is a matter of liberty only as long as we look at the game from the outside; at the inside of the game, however, the player is like a slave following absolute rules.

John Rawls expressed a similar thought saying that “if one wants to play a game, one doesn’t treat the rules of the game as guides as to what is best in particular cases.” (Rawls 1955: 26) The game has been liberated from liberty, its liberty is so absolute that it cannot be compared to any liberty in the real world. Liberty’s purpose, its dependence on a *Lustprinzip* granting an *eudaimonia* or an, as Mill declared, “well–being” of the “liberated, eccentric individual” (Mill 1974: chapter III) exhausts itself into a repetitive, auto–motive occupation in order not to obtain but to become its own *Lustprinzip*, its own *eudaimonia*.

4. Games and Philosophy

It is possible to see the world as a game in describing it as a self–contained, self–sufficient entity. An example is to see the world as what Heidegger has called ‘die Erde’ as an image or a metaphor depicting the world as “that which cannot be forced, that which is effortless and untiring.” (Heidegger 2002: 24) Another example is to see the world as a riddle and to ask philosophy to solve the riddle of the world. For hermeneutics (since Dilthey), the riddle of philosophy is always present because it flows out of the hermeneutic, circular constellation of the individual and the general. Dilthey writes:

“A part that belongs to the nexus of the whole has a meaning relative to this whole to the extent that it realizes a relationship already inherent in life. [...] Here we come upon what seems to be an insoluble riddle.” (Dilthey 2002: 281) To say that philosophy is a riddle suggests that it is more than an accumulative catalogue of questions waiting to be answered in a certain order, but it allows a gamelike moment to enter into the process of philosophical thought. In a riddle, the answering of questions produces infinitely new questions, references to old questions, etc. The infinite production of questions and answers follows a gamelike pattern, it reckons with the unforeseen and it often repeats the same questions. And all this happens without causing annoyance, without degenerating, through its infiniteness, into a ridiculous circle of absurdity. The constellations and relations of the questions and answers seem to be directed by invisible structures helping to strive towards one solution: the Solution of the riddle. Dilthey believed that there is a “point in the secret of life that remains inaccessible to rigorous thought. We cannot think of the events’ last cause. The constellation remains a riddle.” (Dilthey 1984: 116, my translation)

The game lies on the ground of philosophy in the same way in which it lies (in Huizinga’s view) on the ground of civilization. Any gamelike disposition within philosophy cannot be *looked for* since this very disposition represents a riddle that is incessantly guessed but never solved. It is hidden for anyone who looks for analogies or cause and effect relations. The disposition of objects in the world and in life, just like the disposition of the questions and answers in philosophy, is that of a game — and philosophy about it is a game itself: it is a *Rätsel*. This is how the riddle is transposed onto philosophy: to look for game in philosophy is philosophy as well.

Eugen Fink believes that the gamelike constitution of human thought cannot be *found*, but that it always has to be *seen* anew. For him, the equation ‘world = game’ does not represent a “phenomenological result” (*phänomenologischer Befund*), but opens a “path of thinking” (*Weg des Denkens*). (Fink 1960: 65) Also Gadamer’s comparison of the process of understanding with a game of chess does not claim that the mere knowledge of the rules of chess comes close to an experience of philosophical understanding. In *Rhetorik, Hermeneutik und Ideologiekritik* Gadamer describes the case of a difficult and very complex constellation of chessmen which can arise within a game of chess where the solution can only be guessed like the answer to a riddle: “For in it we have ‘seen through’ something that seemed odd and unintelligible: we have brought it into our linguistic world. To use the analogy of chess, everything is ‘solved,’ resembling a difficult chess problem where only the definitive solution will makes understandable (and then right to the last piece) the necessity of a previous absurd position.” (Gadamer 1977: 29) At first sight it looks as if Gadamer alludes to the knowl-

edge of a formal structure: the relationships between the chessmen need to be discovered. However, Gadamer does not equate the knowledge of the general, ever-valid rules of the game of chess with the model of understanding. Understanding takes place at the very moment an individual and unique situation is guessed and transposed into human language. Gadamer says nothing about the further availability of the result of this individual understanding. The solution of the difficult constellation does not represent, even when being fixed by means of human language, knowledge in the form of a rule or the structure of the game. On the contrary, it applies only for this one constellation and is, as such, to a large extent, useless for further games of chess.

There are first the eternal, proper rules of the game of chess which can be learned by heart; then there are the rules which follow from those and which can be learned through an evocation of several different constellations of chessmen and which form the knowledge about the game of chess. The difference between both is very much reflected by the difference between *aletheia* and *doxa* as two kinds of knowledge, which is important in the art of rhetoric about which Gadamer writes: “This knowledge of the good and its capability in the art of speaking does not mean a universal knowledge of ‘the good;’ rather it means a knowledge about that to which one has to persuade people here and now, a knowledge of how one is to go about doing this, and a knowledge of those whom one has to persuade.” (Gadamer 2007: 253) The knowledge of rules is knowledge of the ‘how’ of their use rather than of the ‘what’ of their meaning. In the example of the chess game, ‘understanding’ describes the experience of being for one moment, in a very intense way, united with the game in which one is involved, penetrating it for seconds, intellectually, completely; it appears more through what Plato calls a ‘philosophical surprise’ (*taumazein*) than through calculated scientific reflections.

5. Seeing the Game

Huizinga’s game can only be ‘seen’ in culture in the form of a cultural style though it is not necessarily empirically present. Wittgenstein describes ‘seeing’ as a shifting between perception and thinking: “Seeing as... is not part of perception. And for that reason it is like seeing and again not like seeing.” (Wittgenstein 1958: II 197) Also Wittgenstein concentrates on the game as a phenomenon whose definition cannot be founded on the description of fixed rules, but whose existence depends on a certain non-definable surplus. Wittgenstein suggests calling the decisive quality which gives the game its gamelike condition a *Witz* which he believes to find in

every game. (cf. Wittgenstein 1958: I §§ 564, 607) We “know what a game is” but we are incapable of “saying what it is.” Behind every definition of the game is lurking another hidden and *unpronounced definition*: “What does it mean to know what a game is? What does it mean to know it and not be able to say it? Is this knowledge somehow equivalent to an unformulated definition? So that if it were formulated, I would be able to recognize it as the expression of my knowledge?” (Wittgenstein 1958: I § 75) Wittgenstein’s point overlaps with Huizinga’s who declares the *Witz* (*aardigheid*) to be the essential quality of games, a quality that cannot be traced back to any other origin other than itself. (Huizinga 1970: 21) Wittgenstein refers to different aspects of objects provided by sketches representing a box at one time and a glass-cube at another. He shows how much seeing is linked to guessing: “But we can also *see* the illustration now as one thing now as another. So we interpret it, and *see* it as we *interpret* it.” (Wittgenstein 1958: II 367–368) Wittgenstein’s insight that ‘to see a thing as’ includes perception as well as thinking (*Denken*) can be read like a statement of hermeneutic philosophy trying to locate reflective and self-reflective moments in any kind of understanding and interpretation or just even seeing. Similar to Wittgenstein, Gadamer’s insists that “in order to see something when looking one must think whilst seeing.” (Gadamer 1977: 39)

Like Wittgenstein, Gadamer points to some dynamic, creative component in understanding as a special kind of seeing or reading that transcends the limits of a pure reconstruction of an ‘original’ sense. Tzvetan Todorov calls this process the construction of a “univers imaginaire” (Todorov 1975: 417) and Ricoeur speaks of an “interprétation créatrice.” (Ricoeur 1975: 73) Maurice Blanchot believes that “to read does not mean to write the book again but to make that the book writes itself or is written, this time without passing through the intermediary of the writer — without anybody writing the book.” (Blanchot 1955: 254, my translation) Gadamer (like Wittgenstein) indicates a way of grasping this ‘univers imaginaire’ insisting that the dynamic moment appearing within any creative interpretation has the characteristics of a game much more than the characteristics of a regular construction of a structuralizable textual body. Also Wittgenstein provides the example of children playing with a box who manage to *see* the box as a house only through and within the limits of their game (Wittgenstein 1958: I § 293) and draws a link between understanding and playing. To ‘see things as’ always means to see them within a game and it even demands to some extent to enter that game: “And does the child now see the chest as a house? He quite forgets that it is a chest; for him it actually is a house. Then would it not also be correct to say he sees it as a house?” (Wittgenstein 1958: II 206)

Derrida describes a kind of ‘mute seeing’ that he defines as the counterpart of hearing, a hearing always linked to full presence of expressions.

‘Seeing,’ the perception of all *écriture*, is apt for the perception of the game whose rhythm is always interrupted and destroyed by the voice of, for example, the ethnologist or empirical anthropologist: “At first the anthropologist is satisfied merely to see. A fixed glance and mute presence. Then things get complicated, become more tortuous and labyrinthine, when he becomes a party to the play of the rupture of play.” (Derrida 1974: 113) This means that the special kind of seeing shifts between different ‘seeing as’ and consistently closes its ears to loudly pronounced and unequivocal statements about the world.

6. The Absent Game

Several classical definitions of games point indeed to the empirical ‘absence’ of games. Huizinga insists on the impossibility of ‘seeing game in culture’ in a scientific way and suggests that the models of the game and of culture are interdependent from the very beginning: they can only be understood as the very unity they represent. Any empirical separation of the two elements enabling us to look for the one in the other makes their understanding impossible:

When speaking of the play–element in culture, we do not mean that among the various activities of civilized life an important place is reserved for life; nor do we mean that civilization has arisen out of play by some evolutionary process, in the sense that something which was originally play passed into something which was no longer play and could henceforth be called culture. The view we take [...] is that culture arises in the form of play, that it is played from the very beginning. (Huizinga 1970: 66)

In other words, the understanding of ‘play’ or ‘game’ in culture is involved in a hermeneutic circle: the fact that there is the element of game in culture is supposed to be the result of Huizinga’s anthropological work; however, the precondition of attaining this result is ‘to see play in culture.’

It is not uncommon to believe that civilization has its origin in the playing of games. The German anthropologist Leo Frobenius was convinced that “infantile play represents the foundational source originating in the deepest and holiest layers from which all civilization and creative powers have sprung.” (Frobenius 1954: 24, my translation) However, understanding the world as a game is not the same as identifying parts of it with games. The British anthropologist Edward B. Tylor has criticized precisely this naive empirical attitude in anthropology and history when saying: “Only the game is used preferably as subject of a pseudo–historical discourse of a theory which thinks to have attained the origin of human institutions.”

(Tylor 1891: 2) The game is not literally representative of the origin or the foundation of civilization or philosophy, but it expresses or suggests through itself, through its circularity and repetitiveness, the non-foundedness of civilization.

Huizinga also insists that the game can only be 'seen' in culture in the form of a cultural style, which emphasizes the link between play and style. The existence of style often depends on those qualities that are also dominant for the game. For example, style for some authors is clearly dominated by visual components. Marcel Proust believed that style is not a quality of audition, but a "quality of vision" (Gay 1974: 5, fn. 1) and Johann Gottfried von Herder made the perception of style dependent on the particular human capacity called *seeing*: "Humans have the capacity to see *much more* than to hear, and his intelligence, style and composition will function accordingly." (Herder 1891: 464, my translation) The style (just like the game) is thus absent *as an empirical fact* though it can be 'seen.'

7. Hermeneutics and Play

The aforementioned qualities of play, such as non-foundedness or empirical absence, make it particularly attractive for hermeneutic theory. A 'hermeneutics of play' begins at the moment when theories of interpretation abandon their romantic conception of *Einfühlung* (valid at least since Herder) as a dominant criterion of interpretation and refuse any belief in the validity of subjective feeling. Dilthey has played a central role here. For Schleiermacher subjectivity was still a positive fact that needed to be recovered as we should "determine the individual elements of a sentence from its context in such a way that there is no doubt that we have grasped the sentence in the way its author thought it." (Schleiermacher 1998: 61) At the same time, Schleiermacher *did* recognize the gamelike character of all those textual elements which cannot be traced back to a *will* (and which are thus unconscious or merely a matter of contingency): "Elements that cannot be traced to a dominating act of the will must stem from free play." (Schleiermacher 1959: 205, my translation)

In the eyes of Schleiermacher the hermeneutic circle is a destructive power unable to provide any theoretical foundation of a philosophy of interpretation; Schleiermacher remained convinced that it can be overcome through the establishment of a fundamental standard code (*Kanon*): "In order to understand the first thing precisely one must have already taken up the whole. Not, of course, to the extent that it is the same as the totality of particulars, but as a skeleton." (Schleiermacher 1998: 28) Schleiermacher desires a technical method able to grasp (*nachbilden*) the creative process

of the author who first saw the whole and then went on to an elaboration of the details: “For in every larger complex the author as well saw the whole before he progressed to the particular.” (Schleiermacher 1998: 28) Schleiermacher’s predecessor Friedrich Ast, on the other hand, did not try to ‘tame’ the circle. Ast is the first philosopher for whom the circle represents a positive possibility of understanding, thus making ‘play,’ at least indirectly, an essential component of the process of interpretation. Ast affirms that a theoretical ‘solution’ (*Lösung*) for the circle requires a ‘going through’ it, as he describes in his *Grundlinien der Grammatik*: “The further I progress with the understanding (*Auffassung*) of the particular, the more obvious and living becomes the spirit, the idea of the whole, that I had grasped already in each particularity, unfolds itself in front of me.” (quoted from Wach 1933: 98, my translation) Ast’s procedure is not an interpretative method proceeding from the general to the individual or from the individual to the general. On the contrary, by proceeding ‘individually,’ one improves one’s understanding of the general. Ast suggests that the general and the individual should be perceived simultaneously.

Strictly speaking, Ast is not the only person at his time to suggest a kind of ‘going through’ the circle. Wilhelm von Humboldt also points to a gamelike quality produced by the circle and to which he refers as ‘lightness’ (*Leichtigkeit*): “To make real and complete observations, to abstract in the purest fashion from them the characteristic essence that is only partially apparent in the enunciations, to go back and forth with ease between observation and concept in order to revise one through the other.” (quoted from Wach 1933: 240, my translation) The constant shifting (back and forth, *hin und her*) of the interpretative point of view from the individual to the general is not grounded on fixed rules.

The hermeneutic circle and its gamelike input receive a still more positive treatment by Schleiermacher’s student August Boeckh by whom Dilthey was profoundly influenced. While Boeckh refuses to believe in a final ‘solution’ of the circle, he does not simply leave it aside either. Boeckh’s *Encyclopädie und Methodenlehre der philosophischen Wissenschaften* (1877) is a comprehensive work on the science of interpretation and an entire chapter is devoted to the *Theorie der Hermeneutik*. Here Boeckh discovers the hermeneutic circle as an instance attempting to coordinate grammatical (general) and subjective (individual) forms of interpretation: “The linguistic explanation based on the objective, general point of view we call grammatical interpretation, the one which is based on subjectivity we call individual interpretation.” (Boeckh 1877: 84, my translation) It is interesting to look closer at the theoretical development of circularity as a typical gamelike model within the history of hermeneutics. Boeckh quickly discovers that the shift from the individual to the general entails methodological prob-

lems: "Different kinds of exegesis presuppose real knowledge though this knowledge can only be extracted from the exegesis of the whole material." (Boeckh 1877: 84, my translation) At first sight a solution of the circle seems to be close: "Grammatical exegesis will detect the sense of the words by submitting it to different individual and real conditions. This provides a foundation for the remaining kinds of exegesis." (Boeckh 1877: 84, my translation) The foundation of any interpretative activity is represented by grammar, that is, by rules. However, what happens if a grammatical phenomenon is general and at the same time individual? The link between circular structures and style becomes obvious once again, since, according to Boeckh, hermeneutics is confronted with such a situation especially when it comes to stylistic questions. Style is a general phenomenon (in the form of the style of an epoch, for example), but at the same time it is an individual act of creation. Boeckh admits that the circle "cannot be avoided in all cases and in no cases can it be avoided completely" because sometimes "the same object is simultaneously the only foundation of the grammatical and the individual interpretation [...] and the task becomes unsolvable." (Boeckh 1877: 86, my translation) When it comes to style, neither empirical nor abstract techniques bring us any further.

For Schleiermacher, on the other hand, style is the solution: "The whole must be called the complete understanding of style." (Schleiermacher 1959: 108, my translation) Still Schleiermacher sees that style is opposed to any structuring by means of techniques: "Grammatically no individuality can be conceptualized but it needs to be intuited. Technically, too. There is no concept of a style." (Schleiermacher 1959: 115, my translation) As soon as we try to understand a style we need to be aware of "our own way of perceiving things" ("die eigentümliche Art den Gegenstand aufzufassen").

8. Games and Structures

The game manifests itself in the form of an 'absent' concept that can only be seen. It coincides very much with Umberto Eco's interpretation of the 'structure' as an always 'absent structure' which "does not exist as such but is a product of my operations oriented in a certain direction." (Eco 1983: 48, my translation) Eco places the structure into an "original place, which is the one where the being, putting on a mask, reveals itself in determining itself in structural events, but fleeing every structuralization." (Eco 1978: 322, my translation) Interestingly enough, Eco likens this 'absent structure' also to a game: "What every research on the structure of communication illuminates is thus not an underlying structure but the absence of a structure. It is the field of a continuous 'game'." (Eco 1983: xxii, my translation)

Linguistic philosophy has often pointed out that the game and the structure possess similar formal qualities. In his essay *La structure comme jeu*, Émile Benveniste concentrates on the rule–dependent and autonomous components of the game and the structure, and finds a confirmation of the purely formal character of the game in the fact that the game, like the structure, “must always unfold within limits and strict conditions and it constitutes a closed totality.” (Benveniste 1947: 161, my translation)³ On the other hand, distinctions between static and dynamic structures, or closed and open structures bring early thoughts on structures very close to hermeneutics. As far back as 1940, Radcliffe–Brown commented on the double character of the structure by distinguishing between a static and a dynamic structure:

This important distinction, between structure as an actually existing concrete reality, to be directly observed, and structural form, as what the field–worker describes, may be made clearer perhaps by a consideration of the continuity of a social structure through a time, a continuity which is not static like that of a building, but a dynamic continuity, like that of the organic structure of a living body. (Radcliffe–Brown 1979: 192)

Radcliffe–Brown’s musings on dynamic tensions within structures come close to Dilthey’s original definition of *Struktur*. Dilthey defined the ‘structural context’ (*Strukturzusammenhang*) as a quality flowing out of the riddle (*Rätsel*). More precisely, it flows out of the hermeneutic relationship between the individual and its general environment: “Only because life is structurally coherent [...] do we have coherence. This coherence is perceived by means of a comprehensive category, which is making a statement about reality: the relationship between the part and the whole.” (Dilthey 2002: 217) Furthermore, for Dilthey, “the mutual dependence of general knowledge from particular knowledge [...] represents most generally the foundation of its structure.” (Dilthey 2002: 172)

In games, the *explanandum* is its own *explanans*, which creates difficulties for any research in the humanities. We might call the structures of these games ‘open structures,’ as does T.K. Seung, in his book *Structuralism and Hermeneutics* (1982). Seung develops the distinction between open and closed structures, which he also calls ‘thematic structures’ and ‘formal structures’ arguing that the formal conception of the structure (used, for example, in structuralism) is by nature antagonistic towards any consideration of a ‘thematic,’ dynamic content: “A thematic development is a dynamic progression requiring an open system. A purely structural approach, on the other hand, which produces a static structural symmetry or asymmetry

3. A bibliography listing works related to the similarity of the structure and the game can be found in Ducrot 1973: part 3.

devoid of any thematic content, requires a closed system rather than an open one.” (Seung 1982: 89) As an alternative, Seung suggests rediscovering the self-sufficient character of structures and to define them as games: “Every structure is its own reason. Instead of being an *explanandum*, every structure is meant as an *explanans*.” (Seung 1982: 56) This is what has been anticipated by the hermeneutics of play tradition.

9. Conclusion

This article has shown that what can be called a ‘hermeneutic condition of understanding’ is determined by a fundamental doubt about texts, about being, about the human self and life as long as they are referred to as manifestations of a presence or as essences. In this sense, hermeneutic attitudes reminiscent of games can be detected in many areas of philosophical thought. The hermeneutic skepticism about everything which is *real, as such* or simply not played, is not merely methodological, which prevents it from reverting to purely technical solutions. The circular structure of understanding permits the establishment of no clear signifiant, but the game of interpretation produces an endless chain leading from one signifier to the next without ever imitating a divine logos.

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