

HOMO LUDENS

Alkis Kontos

Bernhard Suits, *The Grasshopper: Games, Life and Utopia*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1978.

We must not . . . promise a
fool's paradise

Max Weber

The realm of freedom actually
begins only where labour which
is determined by necessity . . .
ceases

Karl Marx

In his fable of the ant and the grasshopper, Aesop with classical brevity, precision and power advocates prudence. The moral of the story is quite unsettling, even if irrefutable. The brief and painful encounter of Aesop's grasshopper with the ruthless wisdom of the ethic of human existence, work, is the following: it is winter; the ant colony is airing its corn. The grasshopper approaches the colony and with humility begs for a grain of corn. One of the ants asks how he had disposed of his time during the summer days; why he has no winter stock. The grasshopper answers truthfully; he has passed away the time merrily in drinking, singing, and dancing; he never once thought of winter. The pleasure and joy of the moment prevailed. The ant replies with uncompromising righteousness: they who drink, sing, and dance, in the summer, must starve in the winter. Such was the sudden and complete moral education of the grasshopper regarding the fateful realities of summers turning into winters.

This confrontation between the life of the ant and the life of the grasshopper, between the prudential use of summers and the joyful but ultimately remorseful neglect of winters - indeed total forgetfulness of them - is what Professor Suits wishes to re-examine and evaluate in a new light. The ant's triumph and the grasshopper's ridiculous defeat are unacceptable. Unlike Aesop's fable, here the grasshopper's summer life is elevated to a philosophy of life, a veritable critique of the ant. Suits animates his protagonist with intelligence, skill and refreshing wit. The book is impressively designed; Frank Newfeld's illustrations complement Suits's humour and philosophic ironies.

HOMO LUDENS

The result is an original, challenging exploration. It is a conscious imitation of the Socratic dialogue and irony. It is lively, theatrical, Pirandellian; it is unorthodox in form; non-academic, non-scholastic. It is a serious philosophic quest.

The main characters in this play are: The Grasshopper, the practitioner and exponent of idleness, and his two disciples Prudence and Scepticus. Suits's narrative begins just where Aesop's fable ends. The Grasshopper admits that his contact with the ant colony, his request for food, was a mistake; he confesses his weakness. But he rejects the prudence exemplified by the way of life preached by the ants. The supposed superiority of this way of life is vehemently criticized by the Grasshopper. His whole teaching advocates nothing but idleness. The Grasshopper admits the fact of winters but he does not think it ineradicable. For "it is possible that with accelerating advances in technology the time will come when there are in fact no winters" (p. 8). He persists therefore defending the logic of his position even if inapplicable in the present. The Grasshopper's position is that work is not self-justifying and thus his idle way of life, is "the final justification of any work whatever" (p. 9).

Scepticus points out that this insistence on either a life devoted exclusively to play or exclusively to work is unreal. Work and play are interwoven. As the Grasshopper's death from starvation is drawing closer he cryptically suggests that "everyone alive is really a Grasshopper" (p. 9). Then he narrates to his disciples a recurring dream of his, an enigmatic parable, and bids them farewell. The dream parable is this: it has been revealed to him "that everyone alive is in fact engaged in playing elaborate games, while at the same time believing themselves to be going about their ordinary affairs" (p. 10). Whatever occupation or activity you can think of, it is in reality a game" (p. 10). In the dream he proceeds to persuade everyone of his newly found truth. But upon being persuaded each person ceases to exist. In despair and utter solitude he awakens to find the world as before. "But is it, I ask myself, just as before? Is the carpenter on his roof-top simply hammering nails, or is he making some move in an ancient game whose rules he has forgotten!" (p. 10).

Scepticus and Prudence attempt to resolve the Grasshopper's riddles and paradoxes about play, games, and the good life. They resolve that play amounts to "doing things we value for their own sake" and work amounts to "doing things we value for the sake of something else" (p. 15). Play, ultimately, is treated as equivalent to leisure activities (p. 15). The distinction is drawn between playing and playing games, the latter being merely one kind of leisure activity. Moreover, the two disciples determine that "the life of the Grasshopper ought to consist" not simply "in leisure activities, but in playing a *game*" (p. 16). Thus game playing, "and not merely playing in general" appears "to be the essential life of the grasshopper" (p. 16). This argument leads to a systematic exploration of the meaning and nature of games. Scepticus

ALKIS KONTOS

engages in a diligent anamnesis — relying on his notes — of his May-September discussions with the Grasshopper about games, leading to a general theory of games. This discussion constitutes the main and most extensive section of the book, furnishing the basis for the resolution of the Grasshopper's dream.

A general working definition of games, attempting to identify the nature of games including rules, intentions, means, seriousness of playing, is presented. Regarding rules we are told that the players “accept rules so that they can play a game, and they accept these rules so that they can play this game” (p. 31). A comprehensive definition is advanced which undergoes progressive refinement and clarification:

to play a game is to engage in activity directed towards bringing about a specific state of affairs, using only means permitted by rules, where the rules prohibit more efficient in favour of less efficient means, and where such rules are accepted just because they make possible such activity. (p. 34)

In systematic and rigorous exchanges between the guru and the disciple the essentials of game playing are established. The elements of games are: a) ends, b) means, c) rules, d) attitudes of game players - “the lusory (from the Latin *ludus*, game) attitude” (p. 35).

This attitude unifies the other elements. Suits elaborates extensively these elements (pp. 36-41). Regarding the goal of game playing, the author insists that the prelusory goal of a game must be differentiated from the lusory goal of a game. The difference being that the prelusory goal “may be described generally as *a specific achievable state of affairs*” (p. 36). This goal does not state “*how* the state of affairs in question is to be brought about” (p. 36). It can be described independently of any *particular* game (p. 37). The lusory goal, winning, “can be described only in terms of the game in which it figures” (p. 37). Thus the definition of game playing is now stated as follows:

To play is to attempt to achieve a specific state of affairs [prelusory goal], using only means permitted by rules [lusory means], where the rules prohibit use of more efficient in favour of less efficient means [constitutive rules], and where the rules are accepted just because they make possible such activity [lusory attitude]. (p. 41)

HOMO LUDENS

Simply put, "playing a game is the voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles" (p. 41).

The Grasshopper continues by drawing further distinctions and making additional clarifications. A game and the institution of a game are distinguished; triflers, cheats, spoilsports, and players are differentiated. Triflers "recognize rules but not goals, cheats recognize goals but not rules, players recognize both rules and goals, and spoilsports recognize neither rules nor goals" (p. 47). And while players do "acknowledge the claims of both the game and its institution, triflers and cheats acknowledge no institutional claims, and spoilsports acknowledge neither" (p. 47). For a game to be a game "the two extremes of excessive laxity and excessive tightness in the rules" must be avoided (p. 56). This condition requires a limited resource as the basis for the game's performance. For only in the context of a limited resource can we speak of efficiency: "the least expenditure of a limited resource necessary to achieve a given goal" (p. 54).

In a fascinating 6th chapter Suits rejects the possibility of a game with no rules. Suits's style and technique reach their climax in the tale of Ivan and Abdul. Aurel Kolnai's "Games and Aims" is introduced and examined critically in the following chapter.

The dialogue continues; some games require a limitation in principle of the means permitted to be used in order for a player to reach his goal. Mountain climbing is a case in point. Sir Edmund Hillary had used the most efficient means to climb Mount Everest but he would have refused means which preempt the process of climbing, e.g. an elevator, a helicopter. "Sir Edmund had set himself a lusus goal which required him to *climb* mountains rather than the prelusory goal of simply being at their summits, which would not have required him to climb mountains" (p. 87).

The definition of games advanced by the Grasshopper is tested against make-believe games - Cops and Robbers, Cowboys and Indians and other impersonations. The concept of open games, including games of make-believe is discussed (chapter 12). Leading to the last chapter, where the resolution of the Grasshopper's dream parable takes place, Suits explores critically Eric Berne's *Games People Play* in order to refine and clarify even more his own definition of games and our understanding of the nature of game playing. Suits rejects both views of games: radical "autotelism" and radical instrumentalism. The first views games as being "played solely as ends in themselves"; only amateurs play games. Radical instrumentalism "is the view that games are essentially instruments" (p. 146). Suits's view "occupies a middle position" (p. 146), best expressed in contradistinction to Berne's view. Berne's people play games under a psychological compulsion, "like the compulsion that ants have to work" (p. 153). Neither the ants under conditions of economic autonomy nor Berne's players under conditions of psychological

ALKIS KONTOS

autonomy wish to work or play “games” (p. 153). Suits’s view differs, as does his concept of games, since “playing (genuine) games is precisely what economically *and* psychologically autonomous individuals *would* find themselves doing, and perhaps the *only* things they would find themselves doing” (p. 153).

By now both the disciples and the reader are aware of the fundamentals of the Grasshopper’s philosophy of games. But the crucial dream parable and other enigmatic utterances, including the thought that everyone alive is really a Grasshopper, remain unresolved. Quite miraculously the Grasshopper is resurrected and returns to his disciples to resume their dialogue and to resolve the remaining riddles. The resolution is articulated in the form of a hypothetical Utopia. *Wholly* automated machines are imagined to perform all instrumental activities, work (p. 167). All economic problems are solved. Abundance is a reality. All possible interpersonal problems are equally solved (p. 167). People are engaged only in those activities which have intrinsic value (p. 167). The Grasshopper does away with all tensions and anxieties. As Skepticus puts it, “In Utopia man cannot labour, he cannot administer or govern, there is no art, no morality, no science, no love, no friendship” (p. 170). The suggestion is made that even sex could be eliminated! Unlike Norman O. Brown’s *Life Against Death*, where the claim is made that sex has been distorted by the repressions of civilization, the Grasshopper suggests that “sex is the product rather than the victim of civilization . . . when civilization goes, sex - at least as a very highly valued item - goes as well” (p. 171). Thus in this newly described Utopia “we appear to be left with game playing as the only remaining candidate for Utopian occupation, and therefore the only possible remaining constituent of the ideal of existence” (p. 171). Precisely because in Utopia all instrumental activities have been eliminated, game playing “makes it possible to retain enough effort in Utopia to make life worth living” (p. 172).

Skepticus however, points out that scientific — or any kind of intellectual — inquiry cannot be reduced to a merely instrumental activity: “people who are seriously engaged in the pursuit of knowledge value that pursuit at least as much as they do the knowledge which is its goal” (p. 172). This point, Skepticus thinks, can be true of any instrumental activity. He calls it “the Alexandrian condition of man, after Alexander the Great. When there are no more worlds to conquer we are filled not with satisfaction but with despair” (p. 172). An activity can be instrumental from one point of view and intrinsically valuable from another. Many of the activities banished from Utopia as instrumental can be reinstated now for their intrinsic value (p. 173). In short, whenever an individual would wish to engage in an objectively instrumental activity he should be able to do so; if no one wished to do so the society would not collapse (p. 173). The objectively instrumental activities would be

HOMO LUDENS

performed by the automated industry of Utopia. Thus in Utopia individuals "always do things because they want to, and never because they must" (pp. 173-4).

The Grasshopper elaborates this situation through two hypothetical cases.

Case One: an individual having spent his first decade in Utopia doing what newcomers to Utopia usually do (travelled around the world several times, idled in the sun, etc.) has become bored. He wishes to work at something, such as carpentry. But no demand exists for houses which this individual's carpentry will produce; all housing needs are instantly provided. The Grasshopper argues that Utopia should and would provide the opportunity for this individual - and everyone else - to engage in his desired activity. But, the Grasshopper reminds us, such activity cannot be distinguished - under Utopia's circumstances - from game playing. This carpenter and a golfer are identical because the process and not the final results gives them satisfaction. Both "are involved in a voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles; both, that is to say, are playing games" (p. 174). Here, the Grasshopper continues, we have the solution to the predicament of Alexander the Great — which Skepticus raised earlier as a challenge to Utopia's life. Since Alexander the Great "had run out of worlds to conquer . . . he *could* have given it all back and started over again, just as one divides up the chess pieces equally after each game in order to be able to play another game" (p. 174). But, it seems, Alexander the Great "did not really place all that high a value on *the activity* of conquering worlds" (pp. 174-5). He was more interested in the actual, final result.

Case Two: again, we are to imagine an individual whose early experiences are similar to those of the individual in Case One and who now has reached the point of boredom. Unlike the first individual who chose a manual activity, the second individual chooses the pursuit of scientific truth (p. 175). Again, the Grasshopper reminds us that the attitude of the Utopian scientist is the crucial factor. Since the objective need and instrumental value of scientific research has been pre-empted — all objective truth has been achieved — we must imagine our Utopian scientist working on a problem the solution to which he could readily retrieve from the memory banks of the computers, but who persists in his inquiry without recourse to the available solution. This attitude, we are told, is like that of the "devotee of crossword puzzles who knows that the answers to the puzzle will be published next day. Still he tries to solve the puzzle today, even though there is no urgency whatever in having the solution today rather than tomorrow" (p. 175). Again the scientist is engaged in game playing. Thus, we are told, "a Utopian could engage in all of the achieving activities that normally occupy people in the non-Utopian world, but that the quality, so to speak, of such endeavours would be quite different" (p. 175). This *qualitative attitudinal* difference is vividly exemplified by contrasting the

ALKIS KONTOS

attitude of a lumberjack when he is , on the one hand, plying his trade of cutting down trees for the sawmill and, on the other hand, when he is cutting down trees in competition with other lumberjacks at the annual woodcutter's picnic. (p. 175)

Therefore all known trades, "indeed all instances of organized endeavour whatever, would, if they continued to exist in Utopia, be sports" (pp. 175-6).

In pursuing further the logic of his argument or vision, the Grasshopper suggests that the re-introduction of activities to combat boredom in Utopia does not lead to the conclusion "that the moral ideal of man does . . . consist in game playing" (p. 176). For the re-introduction of activities brings with it admiration, sharing, love, friendship (p. 176). More precisely, the re-introduction of the emotions associated with striving - joy of victory, bitterness of defeat - furnishes once again emotional content for art (p. 176). Clearly, all the dimensions of non-Utopian life which had been eliminated are now reinstated. More explicitly, the Grasshopper envisages "a culture quite different from our own in terms of its basis" (p. 176). Our culture is based on various kinds of scarcity; "the culture of Utopia will be based on plenitude" (p. 176). Thus, "while game playing need not be the sole occupation of Utopia, it is the essence, the 'without which not' of Utopia" (p. 176). The Grasshopper informs us that the notable institutions of Utopia would foster sport and other games and he urgently admonishes us "to begin the immense work of devising these wonderful games now," sports and games "unthought of today; sports and games that will require for their . . . mastery and enjoyment - as much energy as is expended today in serving the institutions of scarcity" (p. 176). The Grasshopper's plea is for the serious cultivation now of sports and games for "they are clues to the future." Such cultivation constitutes "the metaphysics of leisure time" (p. 176). But Skepticus objects to all this. The Grasshopper Utopia seems to be the dream world "for those who are very keen on games, but not everyone *is* keen on games" (p. 177). People do want a *purpose* to their activities (p. 177).

This objection triggers a vision in the Grasshopper: the truth of Skepticus's insight about the psycho-philosophical basis of meaningful activity for the individual would ultimately force the downfall of Utopia, the destruction of its automated omnipotence (p. 177). The Grasshopper's haunting vision, "a vision of paradise lost," is inspired by his newly acquired awareness, thanks to Skepticus, that the citizens of Utopia will come "to the conclusion that if their lives were merely games, then those lives were scarcely worth living" (p. 177). This conclusion would gradually undermine the very basis of the automated Utopia. The transformation of all the game activities into "vitaly necessary tasks which had to be performed in order for mankind to survive" would take

HOMO LUDENS

place (p. 177). This vision permits the Grasshopper to articulate the resolution of his original dream parable. "The message of the dream now seems perfectly clear . . . most people will not want to spend their lives playing games. Life for most people will not be worth living if they cannot believe that they are doing *something* useful . . ." (p. 178). To persuade them that their vital purposive activities are but an ancient game whose rules they have forgotten is to force them to vanish, to cease to exist; their whole lives would have been "a mere stage play or empty dream" (p. 177).

Suits's analytical talents and skillful presentation, unorthodox to the sterility of academic scholarship are quite impressive. His Wittgensteinian linguistic probing is admirable. While his dramatic ability is evident, the philosophic theme overrides the possibility of *any* development of the main characters; they are in reality mere voices. Prudence is totally undeveloped; perhaps this is Suits's sardonic rejection of prudential action. Skepticus is superior to Prudence. She is at degree zero intellectually, but neither is he a philosophic creature. Only toward the very end of the play — dialogue does Skepticus show signs of philosophic intelligence. The Grasshopper himself is quite an ambiguous philosophic personality; intellectually he is not the all wise guru. He embodies a principle and acts more like a catalyst than the centre of wisdom. Unlike Socrates, who knew the direction of his questioning and world view, the Grasshopper at crucial moments is at a loss. He is more impressive in his defence of his definition of game playing than when he enunciates the hypothetical Utopia. The reader has every reasonable ground to suspect that the Grasshopper *did not know* the resolution of his dream parable; Skepticus's doubt triggered the vision of Utopia's fall, the meaning and cause of its fall. However, these criticisms can only prove minor, annoying and disappointing aspects of the book; they do not mar the work as a whole.

What is problematic is Suits's central thesis regarding Utopia and its inevitable normalization, the return to non-Utopian cultural practices, the very resolution of the dream parable.

I take it that Suits seeks to establish definitional clarity regarding game playing. The greater part of his book is devoted to this task. The clarification of the nature of game playing is to serve as a base for the exploration of the metaphysics of leisure time, the ideal of human existence. This exploration relies heavily upon a hypothetical Utopia where freedom and necessity, plenitude and scarcity meet with optimal harmony. If I understand Suits correctly, he is suggesting that human beings need challenge and purpose in their lives in order to achieve a sense of meaningful existence. Seriousness *and* purposive activity are the fertile ground of a truly meaningful life. Suits intimates that purposive activity could be a) self-imposed, be free from external compulsion or b) necessitated, dictated externally. But only the former constitutes meaningfully the realm of Freedom. Not every freely

ALKIS KONTOS

chosen activity can bestow meaning upon human existence. Suits tends to forget this point. Game playing is for Suits a self-imposed activity, a self-erected challenge governed by rules and demanding certain essentially appropriate attitudes. Game playing has an inherent structure; it is not chaotic or anarchic. In this sense game playing as defined and clarified by Suits serves him as a metaphor or paradigm of an activity not imposed externally. Games are leisure activities in which we engage simply because we wish to do so. Games and game playing are contrasted to work, which is instrumental activity necessitated by the fact of scarcity. The idleness that the Grasshopper was initially advocating is a renunciation of work, not a call for doing anything in particular. Idleness quickly becomes identical to game playing. This facile transition should have been established or at least argued by Suits. Although they can be opposed to work; idleness, play, games and game playing are not identical.

Suits is equally silent on the distinction between Freedom and Necessity and the organization of work in society. He presents us with the highly artificial distinction of game playing and work. An enormous time is consumed in clarifying the nature of the former; nothing is said regarding the nature of the latter. Work is instrumental activity; work, labour, toil, alienated labour are not discussed. Nevertheless, Suits proceeds to argue that automated abundance cancels the necessity of work. This bold hypothesis, the promise of technologically achieved omnipotence — Suits's "machines are activated solely by mental telepathy, so that not even a minimum staff is necessary for the housekeeping chores of society" (p. 167) — transforms instantly the existing *historical* relation between Necessity and Freedom into a world of Utopia; Necessity is obliterated. Suits has told us nothing about the historical and socio-political structures, dialectics and relations of this magical dyad. Freedom, in Utopia, is an imaginary projection into a beautiful blue horizon, the mere absence of necessity. It is important here to pay attention to the "initial" activities of the citizens of Utopia, the newcomers. Suits speaks of the acquisitive cravings of the Gettys and Onassises; their paradise consists of yachts, diamonds, racing cars, mansions, trips around the world (p. 167). I stress this point because it reveals a serious flaw in Suits's argument. The miraculous, hypothetical elimination of necessity does not correspond to *any* human transformation. The previously prevailing value system, the prevalent historical culture, is posited as *the* human essence. The elimination of work, of Necessity, through technology authenticates past life styles and desires. Human consciousness remains untouched by these profound changes.

Suits does not have to address the abolition of work either as radical or romantic thinker. My criticism is that the hypothetical abolition of work and the ensuing abundance cannot be treated meaningfully unless the historical

HOMO LUDENS

relation of Necessity and Freedom itself is examined first. Work must be delineated within the social organization of human communities. In Suits's study, Utopia provides initially an euphoria of naive acting out of past economic deprivations. But since all status symbols, narcissism and celebrity syndrome have been eliminated, boredom is inevitable. Precisely at this juncture the metaphor of game playing — self-imposed tasks valued intrinsically — is ushered in. Individuals bored after a period of permanent, meaningless holiday, an empty, hollow parade of *ubiquitous* objects and patterns of existence, seek alternatives. Suits's time period for the newcomers to reach boredom is ten years! Work tasks are re-introduced initially as mere game playing. But game playing fills the time vacuum with activity, not necessarily with meaning and purpose. The legitimation of one's life activity calls for more than mere game playing. Seriousness is desired; only in it do humans find significance. Thus the rebellion against automation occurs effecting a return to work, eliminated, by automation and abundance. Game playing of work activities is converted again into necessary work. Human beings apparently cannot find meaning outside the dictates of Necessity; it is as if freedom from Necessity nullifies any activity, undermining its own possible significance.

Freedom and Necessity are central to Suits's endeavour. Their relation, historical and speculative, seems to be confused in Suits's philosophic perspective. When the Grasshopper defends his philosophy of idleness he speaks of future technological advances which will eliminate winters (p. 8). He intimates that everyone alive is really a Grasshopper; in narrating his dream parable he speaks of carpentry, the very example of Case One in Utopia, as "an ancient game" whose rules are forgotten (p. 10). Carpentry (and any other instrumental activity) in a pre-automated, pre-Utopia world cannot be a game; it is a necessity. Nor can we all, therefore, be Grasshoppers in disguise — individuals who play believing we are working — exactly what the citizens of Utopia have the opportunity of doing. The individuals in the original dream parable, before persuaded by the Grasshopper, are the individuals of the fall of Utopia. But the individuals of the dream *never* experienced what Suits tells us they now have forgotten. Work could not be an ancient game in a world of scarcity.

The real problem is posed by the suggested behavior of the individuals in Utopia. The return to the *status quo ante* is presented as a logical and inevitable consequence of two factors: boredom in paradise and the need for meaningful, purposive activity in human life. Suits could be simply telling us that his experiment in utopian thought and his investigation of game playing converge on this point: a viable utopia must provide meaningful, purposive, intrinsically valued activities the archetype of which is to be sought in game playing, if properly understood. Hence Suits's lengthy investigation of games

and game playing. New, as yet unknown, games and sports must be devised. The trans-valuation of values and the alteration of the *basis* of society are also suggested (p. 176). Suits relies excessively on game playing without *any* reference either to the historical conditions of the present society, the womb of which carries the enigma of our future fate, or to the nature of the players themselves. In the brief examination of the inevitable collapse of Utopia not only the desires of the past linger on, indeed prevail, but also *all* human satisfaction is highly atomized; species being and social being are absent. Human intersubjectivity has evaporated. By removing *all* interpersonal problems — ontological, existential, historical — Suits has removed also human association, the source of a positive, indeed indispensable dimension of human existence. He thus condemns both human growth and fulfilment to nullity; imagination and creativity have been ostracized permanently. A static universe is generated which, inevitably, given its inner structural sterility, demands its demise. Meaninglessness is inherent in this type of utopia.

On pp. 93-4 Suits treats briefly Kierkegaard's aesthetics of life and, again very briefly, turns to the ideas of Kant, Schiller and Simmel on aesthetic experience as play, "a kind of 'purposiveness without purpose'" (p. 93). Suits insists on treating play and games as identical (p. 94). Such an identity is too confining and restrictive. Johan Huizinga's masterful study¹ suggests vital differences which are captured linguistically. Having identified play and games as one and the same thing, Suits does not deal with the sociability aspect of games, as Piaget does. I believe this to be a serious weakness. Suits consumes his skill in the linguistic analysis of his subject matter. But the psycho-social dimension of play and games is significant. It is not an accident that Suits's utopians seek to alleviate their boredom with solitary work activities. I think this once again indicates the absence of an ontological reference or reflection in this study.

Marx insisted that freedom, free, creative activity, an end in itself, involved imagination, consciousness and aesthetics. He also insisted that the individuation of this freedom rests on the industrialized, rationalized realm of necessity which cannot be eliminated. Marx sought to humanize this realm of socially necessary work and productivity: he never glorified it. Freedom can entail serious, difficult activities; the composition of music is Marx's example. Its meaningfulness does not preclude struggle or exhaustion and satisfaction is not denied because of inherent difficulties and challenges.

Marcuse sought to go beyond Marx's prescriptions and resolutions. He wished to dissolve the tension, the inherent antinomy between Freedom and Necessity. Central to his proposed resolution are ontology, its historical negation, and aesthetics. The meaningfulness of Freedom and its possible and desirable relation to the realm of Necessity, the realm of socially necessary production, can be articulated ontologically. Without the ontological

HOMO LUDENS

perspective (which calls for a theoretico-empirical validation) it would be absurd to attempt to determine whether or not activities are meaningful. Marcuse concentrates on play-work and automation as the dialectical context of his resolution of the end of domination and the emergence of a non-repressive civilization.

Suits initiates his investigation from the perspective of game playing. The lucidity he achieves in this context becomes a burden. Game playing is the master metaphor for freedom. Neither the free agent nor the substance of freedom are visible here. An inflexible abstraction becomes the criterion. The ontological source of qualitative judgments is removed. Before we proceed to devise new games for our Utopia beyond scarcity, as the Grasshopper admonishes us, perhaps it would be wise to ask: for whom are we devising these games? Metaphorically Suits speaks of ants, the work addicts, who never even entertained the idea of the abolition of instrumental activities (p. 8); of grasshoppers, those who speak of game playing, whose way of life "is the final justification of any work whatever," (pp. 8-9) and those who are not ants anymore but are not grasshoppers yet, Skepticus and Prudence (p. 6). The central problem in Utopia is that abolishing the life of ants, work, does not automatically validate the life of the Grasshopper. A crisis of meaning ensues. The Grasshopper's critique of ant-life, valid as it might be cries out desperately for a more meaningful alternative. It also calls for a more careful examination of how people historically do become ants without dreams of summers freed from the plague of winters.

The activity of game playing looms large in Suits's mind. Qualitative differences between life situations and games are lost in his analogy of life-games. For example, regarding Alexander the Great and his conquest; surely there is a qualitative difference in the uniqueness of an event, our experience of it, and any possible subsequent repetitions of it. To speak of the conquest of the world as if it were identical to a game of chess is absurd. The memory of the experience of the first conquest, the meaning of its achievement, renders *any* subsequent conquest an anti-climax. Similarly Hillary's climb of Mount Everest exhausts its *meaning* in its first accomplishment; it is a unique event. Artistic creation belongs to this category. So do other meaningful human experiences. Suits tends to quantify and mechanize the activity of games; a dull and dispassionate performance could itself generate a climate of boredom. Infinite repetitions do not secure challenge and excitement. The pursuit of excellence is meaningful only in a context of limited resources and possibilities. The *agonistic* spirit differs from obsessive, pathological concern with winning and also differs from the pleasant excitement with which we commit ourselves to a game of chess on a Sunday afternoon.

This book, with all its charm and insights, does not succeed in relating

ALKIS KONTOS

meaningfully idleness, play, games and game playing to life and Utopia. Unless the Grasshopper's philosophy is fully developed, and I hope Suits will do so in a future volume, Aesop's austere moral remains untarnished in its practical, expedient and merciless realism.

Department of Political Economy
University of Toronto

Notes

1. Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1955. It is from this work that I take the title of this essay.
-