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Passages to Play: Paradox and Process

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The message "This is play" creates a boundary between not-play and play. This boundary is constituted through self-referential paradox. Such paradox depends upon qualities of processuality, which also characterize play. Thus, every passage to play through a paradoxical boundary imputes processuality to the medium of play. When processual qualities of play are embedded at a high level of cosmos, the entire organization of cosmos is suffused by these qualities. Then cosmos approximates a system of self-transformation. These conditions are illustrated by aspects of Indian cosmology, in particular the concepts of *lila* and *maya*. In this cosmos, the processuality of play is top down, fully in keeping with the ethos and rhythms of the system. Top-down play is contrasted with bottom-up play, whose processual qualities are perceived as resistant to and as subversive of principles of cosmos. The presence of bottom-up play is more consonant with Western monotheism.

If you're going to study play you've got to carry in the forefront of your mind what sort of logical type this class is. What is the level of classification, what does it enclose, what are the messages that label it, if any, and so on?
(Bateson, 1988, p. 22)

The concept of cosmos refers to the order of a cultural universe in its broadest, most comprehensive sense (Long, 1987). Whether ideas of play can be related substantially to conceptions of cosmos is one major test of the power of play, of its forceful influence on the organization of the human imagination that we call culture. Are there grounds to support the view that ideas of play may influence the ways traditional cosmologies are put together, the ways they work? If so, what does this say about the structuring of cosmologies in which ideas of play have little or no role? The implications of these questions are far reaching, and there is more than a little hubris in raising them in such an unadorned fashion,

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without numerous scholarly qualifications and emendations. Nonetheless, I believe that such questions go to the heart of play in the human universe, whether play is our invention or is a biological disposition. Therefore, these questions should be addressed even though our efforts, indeed my efforts, fumble, stumble, and trip over only a tiny outcrop of these cosmic puzzles.

I haven't any clear-cut answers. The route I would like to take you through is circuitous and, at the outset, seems to have little direct relevance to the questions posed. But, as scholars of play, I hope you agree that the shortest distance is often roundabout.

The route I've planned goes through a passage to a way station. This passage is from what may be called, rather awkwardly, not-play (or non-play), to play. My premise is that play, and ideas that can be understood to resonate with play, are given some autonomous recognition in virtually all cultures; therefore, cultures make some ideational distinction between not-play and play. Given that these are distinct ideational domains, they are related by the passage from one to the other. So too, this passage occurs through what may be called, heuristically, a boundary or a frame—the nexus where messages of not-play and play interact. This meeting place is strange, for it is constituted from paradox. Yet paradox contains qualities that help us to understand the power of play in human cosmology.

The way station I mentioned is inside the boundary itself, the boundary in between not-play and play, the boundary composed of paradox. By peering within this boundary, we may find qualities of play that help to explain its effect on boundaries and its potential influence on the organization of cosmos.

On the basis of these arguments, I will suggest the following relationship between play and cosmos and will reformulate this further on. If qualities of play found within the boundary between not-play and play are present also in a particular cosmos, then where these qualities of play are located in that cosmic scheme will influence the ways that cosmos is conceived to exist and to operate. To put this more straightforwardly, a cosmic scheme that is influenced by premises of play seems to operate quite differently from one that is less so.

I will apply this approach in a rudimentary manner by taking up a few aspects of Hindu cosmology, within which an idea of play seems to be embedded at a high level of abstraction. In this respect, mythic and religious cosmologies are more amenable to these preliminary formulations because metaphysical conceptions are often made more forthright. In closing, I will touch on questions of comparison by distinguishing between what I call top-down play and bottom-up play.

Passages to Play: Extending Bateson's Problem of Play as Paradox

In his seminal paper "A Theory of Play and Fantasy," first published in 1955, Bateson (1972) made three basic points. First, the invocation of play creates a boundary in between not-play and play. Second, this boundary is paradoxical. Third, this same invocation of play also overcomes the paradox it creates, enabling passage into the reality of play. For my purposes, it is important to understand how his analysis proceeded. Bateson made problematic the relationship of not-play to play by using Whitehead and Russell's (1927) theory of logical types. This enabled Bateson to posit play as an abstraction different from that of not-play. The logic of play, he seemed to argue, frames it differently from that of not-play.

Let me emphasize at the outset that Bateson's problem was epistemological—that is, his concern was the character of the relationship of not-play to play, as a puzzle in adaptive communication. In his view, this relationship privileged neither not-play nor play. Neither was inferior to the other. Not-play and play were organized according to premises that were different. But more than this, their respective premises radically contradicted one another to create what Hofstadter (1980) has called a tangled hierarchy. At issue was not the contents of these domains (e.g., whether one was real and serious and the other, illusory and pretend). Instead, the problem of their difference was located in the very nexus of their interaction, in the logic of the frame (in the logic of what I call the boundary) in between not-play and play.

Bateson recognized that this kind of frame has a peculiar, paradoxical character. He wrote, "it is our hypothesis that the message 'This is play' establishes a paradoxical frame comparable to Epimenides' paradox" (Bateson, 1972, p. 184). As I noted, this invocation or meta-message of play—that Bateson called "This is play"—does three things simultaneously: It creates the frame; it creates the paradox of the frame; and it overrides this paradox, opening the way into play. The paradox referred to is of the self-referential variety. So, Epimenides, the Cretan, stated that all Cretans were liars. A more compact version of this kind of paradox would simply say "This statement is false." If the statement is true, then it is false; but if the statement is false, then it falsifies itself. Playfully, we could replace the period that ends this sentence with the sign for infinity, at least for a time.

Among the examples that Bateson used to illustrate this paradox is one closer in substance to the issue of play—the example of the bite and the playful nip. The playful nip looks like a bite, but it signifies something quite different. It is a bite, and it is not a bite, at one and the same time. It is a different bite, perhaps an imaginary bite, a bite that does not exist, yet does, for it is consequential as a bite that wasn't (Handelman, 1990, p. 69). Or, one may say that the playful nip is a bite on its way to becoming what it isn't. Simultaneously, the playful nip is not only a bite and a non-bite, not only one thing and another, but also a bite in process; in transformation to something else. Something looks like what it isn't (Napier, 1986, p. 1), and indeed it is that. This kind of formulation has significant implications for the boundary in between not-play and play, and I will get to this shortly.

In his 1955 article, Bateson addressed the logic of self-referential paradox as structure and process (and therefore also as temporal). Bateson depicted a self-referential paradox in terms of a rectangular frame within which was written, "All statements within this frame are untrue," followed by two alternatives within the rectangle, "I love you" and "I hate you." This rectangular frame may be misleading, if one thinks that it models a paradoxical reality that one enters into, on the other side of the boundary. Quite the contrary, this depiction models the interior logic of the frame itself. In other words, it models the boundary, or the threshold between realities. Likewise, the depiction models the paradoxical interior of the boundary in between not-play and play.[1] Let me emphasize that the realities of play are not necessarily paradoxical in relation to themselves, but play is paradoxical in relation to not-play.

Bateson barely addressed the interior features of play worlds themselves—of how these realities are put together and experienced, subjects that have been the focus of so much thought and research. However, he did demonstrate imaginatively and incisively the problematic character of the paradoxical passage from not-play to play. Nevertheless, he speedily disregarded the significance of this paradoxical passage for an epistemology of play by invoking the meta-message "This is play." This meta-message enables us, with speed and ease, to override the paradox of passage from one kind of abstraction, one kind of reality, to another, on a routine and mundane basis, without paying heed to the magnitude of our accomplishment.

This is where Bateson stopped. Having found the way out of paradox, Bateson didn't look into paradox, yet there he would have found hints of how play works and what play can do. Instead, with the solution for the passage to play in hand, Bateson pursued no further that which paradox, and paradox as boundary, intimate about play and about the effects of play on boundaries. Nonetheless, my reading of Bateson is of an implicit invitation to peer into the paradoxical composition of this kind of boundary in order to consider the relevance of paradox for play. I would like to turn to this now.

Peering Into Boundaries

Most boundaries we are familiar with in daily life either are traversed routinely or close off special domains of experience. Both are commonly marked by thresholds, whether these are thresholds of space (physical and visible), of time (counted and felt), or of sociality (known and normative). For my purposes, the presence of all such boundaries can be summarized as shifts in social definition, from some segment of continuity to its discontinuity, where this discontinuity is the location of boundary. Here the sides of the boundary are adjacent to and contiguous with one another. Regardless of how forceful these boundaries are, whether because of their pervasiveness or because of the hegemonies of power they signify, there is nothing inherently problematic about them. They separate alternatives in an either/or fashion. These boundaries are constructs that retain their shape through either consensus or imposition. They are always subject to redefinition and to change. These boundaries are not relevant to the themes pursued here.

Boundaries that are made out of self-referential paradox are quite distinct and are especially significant to my purposes. More generally, such boundaries probably symbolize locations of potential crossing between different realities. In this regard, the passage to play is analogous to the classic problem of paradoxical movement between contrasting levels or domains of cosmos, from one reality to another, movement that Eliade (1964, pp. 483-486) called paradoxical passage (e.g., the necessity to go where night and day meet, to find a gate in a blank wall, or to pass between two boulders that constantly clash together). In other words, it is to simultaneously do one thing and its contrary, to do the impossible.

Such points of passage are made out of paradox. The interior of the boundary in between not-play and play is constituted as a severely restricted and highly redundant world, one that is formed through self-reference, contradiction, and infinite regress and that encloses itself within itself (Hughes & Brecht, 1984, p. 1). This tiny world of paradox is itself a simulation of the passage between realities. In its most rudimentary form, this miniscule world consists of two alternatives (I love you . . . I hate you, this is not-play . . . this is play, and so on). These alternatives are governed by self-contradiction such that each leads to and negates the other, which leads to and negates the other, and so forth. According to Bateson (1980, p. 130), "Norbert Weiner used to point out that if you present the Epimenides paradox to a computer, the answer will come out yes . . . no . . . yes . . . no . . . until the computer runs out of ink or energy."

Because each alternative exists on the same level of abstraction, where each is given the same value as the other and is without the capacity to dominate or to cancel the other, paradox is generated. The paradox seems like an impassable trap. On the other hand, the very conjunction and interaction of these contradictory alternatives makes this kind of paradox a nexus of potential crossing between levels of abstraction or between alternative realities.

In her fascinating book *Paradoxia Epidemica: The Renaissance Tradition of Paradox*, Colie (1966) pointed to several premises of self-referential paradox that are especially relevant to the interior of the paradoxical boundary of neither/nor. She noted, first, the closed structure of this sort of paradox. "The perfect self-contradiction," she wrote, "is a perfect equivocation" (Colie, 1966, p. 6). She continued, "It tells the truth and it doesn't . . . its negative and positive meanings are so balanced that one meaning can never outweigh the other, though weighed to eternity." Indeed, such paradox has no formal ending (Colie, 1966, p. 21).

Not only is this sort of paradox totalistic, but inside itself it breaks down and resynthesizes the contradictions that are the basis for its very existence. Thus, not only does such paradox deal with itself both as form and as content, as subject and object, but it also collapses these distinctions. Subject turns into object, object into subject. So too, the means of paradox are always its ends as it turns endlessly in and upon itself (Colie, 1966, p. 518). Phrased otherwise, this kind of paradox transforms itself continually and continuously; its structure is also its process, its process its very structure. The stability of paradox is change. The internal collapse of categories and their resynthesis are evidence for Colie that paradox ultimately insists upon a unity of being. Paradox, she commented, folds "all its parts into one unbroken [whole] . . . paradox is self-regarding, self-contained, and self-confirming; it attempts to give the appearance of ontological wholeness" (Colie, 1966, p. 518). Given its powerful momentum toward wholeness and totality, toward seamlessness and self-separation, this kind of paradox creates a powerful demarcation, a forceful boundary.

Yet inside this special boundary, there is another aspect of importance. Colie (1966, p. 7) wrote that the self-referential paradox is "profoundly self-critical," for within its narrow strictures it is continually calling itself into question, making itself problematic. She commented that it operates at the "limits of discourse" (p. 10), calling into question those categories that are thought out in order to express human thought. Playing on the Latin term for mirror, *speculum*, she added that the self-referential paradox is "literally, speculative, its meanings infinitely mirrored, infinitely reflected, in each other" (p. 6). Infinite regress, but it is also an imaginative search of the parameters of the in between condition of boundariness—that is, of being in between. Reflecting further, Colie (1966, p. 11) insisted that, "Like a tight spring, the implications of any particular paradox impel that paradox beyond its own limitation to defy its own categories." Self-limited, it denies limitation. Here she intimated that just as paradox bounds itself

off and closes itself in, so too it has the potential to open itself, to become a nexus of passage, of crossing through the impassable. Paradox may function as a gateway (Yusa, 1987, p. 191).

These premises of self-referential paradox compose the boundary between not-play and play. In turn, the paradox generates qualities that are of direct relevance to ideas of play and to how play can act on other boundaries.

Thus, paradox is not only full of movement but is constituted wholly and only through movement. Once set into operation, it seems to go on forever, nearing a metaphor of perpetual motion. It is a fiercely dynamic medium, one that is highly processual (cf. Slaate, 1968). Its being is always a becoming, to paraphrase Gadamer (1988, p. 110), and it is conducive to spherical thinking rather than to lineal thought (Yusa, 1987, p. 194). Just as it contains and collapses distinctions—between ends and means, structure and function—so it actualizes the perfect praxis of idea and action.[2] There seems to be no such phenomenon as a static paradox, or one that is stable without being continually unstable. Indeed, the paradox of self-reference is highly systemic in its self-reproduction through self-transformation.

The only way out of this sort of paradox (aside from waiting for entropy to degenerate the structure) is to make a choice. The passage through paradox is a matter of agency. In this, the self-criticism of paradox is significant because it spells out alternatives even as it attributes equal values to these alternatives. Self-doubt evokes a reflexive stance that may break the dynamic deadlock of the paradoxical boundary.

Choice requires a hierarchy of value, the preference of one alternative to others. This preference is an index of change in value, one that breaks the dynamic deadlock. Passage through this kind of boundary is always a discourse on change in values. Phrased differently, there is no movement between realities without a change in values. The capacity to change values is a prerequisite of moving between levels of abstraction, whether this is seemingly as simple as an act of imagination, as in the case of play, or as complex as training in self-transcendence. The passage through paradox demands this capacity. This is the significance of Bateson's meta-message, "This is play." It is a message of passage through paradox because it makes a choice—it puts the value of play above that of not-play. One cannot play without changing values, without changing the value of reality, without changing realities.

These qualities of paradox have strong affinities to qualities of play. The paradoxical boundary, the passage from not-play to play through neither/nor, cryptically prefigures many of the qualities of play realities. Especially important is the powerful thrust of processuality. The passage to play makes a structural difference, but one that is related intimately to processuality. Processuality speaks to the flexibility and malleability, the fluidity and changeability, that pervade so many contexts of play.[3] At the same time, the paradoxical passage from not-play to play creates self-transformation through two degrees of abstraction. One is the level of the paradox itself, the level of neither/nor, where not-play and play interact, lead to, and turn into the other. The second is the movement between levels or realities, through the meta-message that enables choice, and so enables exit from the paradox and entry into play.

Let me reformulate the relationship between play and cosmos that I put forward at the beginning of this lecture. Every invocation of play demonstrates the immediate presence of the impassable yet fluid boundary that is passed through. Every invocation of play demonstrates the immediate presence of premises of self-transformation. Every invocation of play puts things in motion. Every invocation of play demonstrates the immediate presence of qualities that enable passage through this boundary—and once more I especially emphasize qualities of movement and change.[4]

This formulation suggests the following kind of correspondence: The higher, the more abstract, the level of cosmos at which these qualities of play are embedded and legitimated, the greater the influence of these qualities on the organization of that cosmos. Therefore, where the invocation of play is embedded in cosmos at a high level of abstraction, its fluid, transformational qualities reappear also at lower levels of abstraction, permeating their influence there. The boundaries throughout such a cosmos are more malleable, and the entire cosmos may approximate more closely a system of self-transformation.

Play and Self-Transforming Cosmology: Lila and Maya

I return now to the question of relationships between play and cosmos. I'd like to address (with great brevity) two ideas that have been prominent in Indian cosmologies. One is called *lila*,[5] and the other, *maya*.[6] Like their more recent counterparts, the ancient cosmologies within which these ideas were invented and flourished made the continuing existence of cosmos contingent on perpetual change. Cosmos continually transformed itself continuously, reproducing itself as phenomenal form.[7]

In the ancient Sanskrit text, the *Rig Veda*, the cosmic Self (*Brahman*) is the undifferentiated, unreflective unity that "breathes or pulsates by itself, though without breath" (Miller, 1985, p. 53). At some moment it began the directional process of differentiating itself, thereby creating the level of gods, who in turn gave shape to human agency. One may argue that a paradox of self-reference is embedded in that initial moment of differentiation when the cosmic Self became to itself simultaneously one thing and another, Self and Other. I will return to this shortly.

Following the first movement of the cosmic Self, evolution continued ceaselessly through extremely lengthy durations. Yet all evolution was entropic. Eventually the process would reverse itself, destroying the phenomenal cosmos and returning to the sentient but undifferentiated and unreflective cosmic Self, then to begin another cosmic cycle.

The order of this world was never at rest, never static—it was one of an ongoing "becoming." The fundamental rhythms of these cosmic processes were analogous to those of expansion and contraction, construction and destruction, or, in the language of the *Rig Veda*, weave forth, weave back (Miller, 1985, p. 58). Expansion and construction connote descent and devolution through the creation of a hierarchy of increasingly material levels of phenomenal reality. Contraction and destruction refer to contrary processes that ascend to a condition of cosmic holism, one without difference. In this cosmos, "everything is in constant motion . . . but this constancy of movement is itself the stability of cosmic order" (Miller, 1985, p. 289).

Ideas of play were given cosmic significance, especially in relation to the puzzle of why the cosmic Self, utterly without desire or need, bothered to create the phenomenal cosmos. The concept of lila answered this. Lila is a Sanskrit noun that means play or sport—in the sense of diversion, amusement, fun. It also connotes effortless, rapid movement (Huizinga, 1970, p. 51). The highly influential text, the *Vedanta Sutra* of the 3rd century C.E., states that the creative activity of the Divine is mere lila, "such as we see in ordinary life" (Thibault, 1962, Pt. 1, Bk. 2, Sect. 1, verse 33). The great religious teacher, Shankara (9th century C.E.), commented on this passage,

> the process of inhalation and exhalation is going on without reference to any extraneous purpose, merely following the law of its own nature. Analogously, the activity of the Lord also may be supposed to be mere sport, proceeding from his own nature, without reference to any purpose. (Thibault, 1962, pp. 356-357)

Lila is the motive that is without motive: spontaneous action wholly for its own sake (cf. O'Flaherty, 1984, p. 230). The Divine makes and regulates the cosmos out of neither need nor necessity, "but by a free and joyous creativity that is integral to his own nature. He acts in a state of rapt absorption comparable to that of an artist possessed by his creative vision" (Hein, 1987, p. 550). In lila, in play, the Divine takes spontaneous delight in his own self-transformation and, therefore, in that of the cosmos with which he is homologous (Zimmer, 1984, p. 24). By providing the motive, as it were, for the ongoing creation of the phenomenal cosmos, lila embeds the meta-message "This is play" at a high, abstract level of cosmic organization.

Earlier, I said that a paradox of self-reference was embedded in the initial movement, the first moment of differentiation within the cosmic Self. Through that movement, the cosmic Self became to itself simultaneously one thing and another, self and other, through lila. Let me emphasize that in this cosmos, this paradox was integral to the beginning of self-definition, to the very creation of self through the division between self and other. Moreover, this also was the creation of self-alienation, of estrangement from self, of knowing oneself otherwise, because this was inherent in the creation of other from self, self from other.[8]

Therefore, this paradox of self-reference also constituted the very first boundary, that between self and other. This boundary also was created in lila—that is, by the equivalent of the meta-message "This is play." Indeed, this is the boundary in between not-play (the undifferentiated cosmic Self) and play (the creation of the other, and the definition of self through the other). Likewise, lila signified the first passage through this boundary, just as this passage signified the creation of cosmos. In this cosmology, lila (play) is implicated in many rudiments of the creation of being and cosmos—of self and other, of the boundary in between them, and of self-alienation.

In the terms I have outlined, the meta-message "This is play" imputes to the comprehensive organization of this cosmos all of the qualities of play that are embedded in the paradoxical passage from not-play to play. These are the qualities of malleability and fluidity, movement and change. As I noted, in the cosmology under discussion, the paradoxical passage from not-play to play is embedded in the very first movement of the cosmic Self as it began the creation of the phenomenal cosmos. Movement, one may say, is the mysterious choice of the cosmic Self. It is the passage from inaction to action, from immobility to mobility. Processuality is encoded in this paradoxical passage, and cosmic action and movement are identified with play. These qualities of play are attached to all differences among levels, to all boundaries, putting them in play in the cosmic system.

In all Indian cosmologies, cosmic process is cosmic regulation. Divine play (lila) was identified not only with creation but also with its ongoing processuality. For example, in numerous classical myths, the god Shiva and his wife play dice. The dice are named after the great agons of time in Hinduism. One scholar (Hiltebeitel, 1987, p. 473) has commented that "The dice play of the divine couple thus represents the continuity of the universe and their absorption with and within it."

The character of play (lila) was also embedded within certain great deities of later Hinduism. Here lila is related to their capacity to manifest themselves within the human world. Their shifts among levels, and their abrupt appearances among humankind, are the embodied effects of cosmic processes in the world. Their appearances are paradoxical. Prominent among these puzzles is the paradox of the infinite god who is "embedded in finite form," at the human level of cosmos (Dimock, 1989, p. 164). This paradox plays on the simultaneous difference yet non-difference between god and humankind and on their simultaneous separation and non-separation from one another. Therefore, to humankind, deity is at one and the same time transcendent and immanent, unknowable and knowable (*bheda/abheda*) (Dimock, 1989, p. 162; Handelman, 1987a).

For example, the god Krishna is a human form [*avatara*] of the god Vishnu. Krishna contains the entire cosmos within himself. He is a child, full of spontaneous, mischievous fun, playing with his own shadow, stealing butter, and eating dirt. He is a beautiful youth who plays the flute, frolics, and seduces the village girls (see Hawley, 1981; Kinsley, 1975). He is the misshapen, monstrous, primeval, Jagganath. One indologist (Dimock, 1989, p. 165) commented that all of these Krishnas are real, and all are really Krishna—each form is the infinite, essential godhead (Dimock, 1976, p. 113). These forms are his play, his lilas, because "the full deity [who is the cosmos] is in constant motion and therefore of everchanging form" (Dimock, 1989, p. 164; Handelman, 1987a).[9]

As I discussed in relation to the cosmic Self, the motion of lila intimates motive in the creation of the phenomenal universe. Moreover, the appearance of lila is that of the Divine, the manifestation of cosmic process on different levels of the universe. In both instances, this presence of play is also the presence of boundaries. In the first instance—that of creation—lila points to the making of boundaries, that is, the making of those differences among phenomena that define and constitute the world.[10] In the second—the transformative manifestation of deity—lila demonstrates passage through boundaries. Embedded at a high level of cosmic organization, the idea of play influences the fluidity and permeability of boundaries. Barriers to passage are transmuted more into way stations or signposts; the continual, playful movement of cosmic forces among levels relates directly to the transformative character of the entire cosmos.[11]

A few remarks now on maya, a crucial idea in Indian cosmologies. Although it has no linguistic link to play, the qualities of maya complement to a high degree those of lila. Lila and maya have a good deal of functional resonance with one another in their implications for the organization of cosmos. The

authoritative, etymological study of maya (Burrow, 1980, p. 319) stated that the word, by itself, meant craft or skill, but when the word was used in connection with deities, it connoted their mysterious "management or manipulation of the forces of nature" and, less frequently, their acts of creation.[12] Metaphors of maya often emphasize its elusive force for continuing change (Lannoy, 1971, p. 290).[13] Later it acquired the meaning of the power of illusion.

A most enigmatic concept, maya is full of the powers that move the phenomenal cosmos and keep it in motion, in accordance with its own nature (Miller, 1985, p. 114). That nature is of "something constantly being made" (O'Flaherty, 1984, p. 119). Maya, one may say, is the management of motion. So, for example, in the following verse from the *Rig Veda* (10.85.18-19a, cited in Johnson, 1980, p. 92), maya refers to the power that moves sun and moon and, by implication, the cosmos in its entirety:

> One after another the two turn, by maya,
> Two children playing, going round a sacrifice.
> One, regards all creatures,
> The other, establishing the seasons, is born again.
> Ever anew and anew being born, he comes [repeatedly]
> into existence.

Possessed in differing degrees by deities, demons, and humans, maya is the faculty by which they weave changes into the continually shifting fabric of the phenomenal cosmos. Maya alters the cosmic warp and weft, transmuting its balances and imbalances such that the entire cosmic system continues to operate according to its own nature. In this regard, maya is something like the miraculous means for the manipulation of cosmic order, by which the cosmic system produces the phenomenal effects of and for its own continuing existence (cf. Shastri, 1911, p. 31).

These sidelong glances into Indian cosmology can do no more than give a rhetorical thrust to the claim that this cosmos is organized according to premises of self-transformation. Yet this argument is significant for an appreciation of the powers of play in different cosmologies. In using the phrasing of self-transformation, I want to stress the following. This cosmos is in a condition of continual and continuous change. Less obvious, perhaps, is that this change is total. The parts, as it were, of this cosmic system have no inherent shape, no integral stability, in their own right. Everything, everyone, is in process, undergoing change all the time. At issue, then, is not the changing of relationships among the stable parts of this system, but instead how everything is thought to change within itself through its relations to everything else.[14]

Indian cosmologies totalize change through various theories of creation and destruction, from the smallest to the grandest of scales, and through brief periods and extremely lengthy temporal cycles. These are cosmologies in which the cosmos totally absorbs its own changes within itself just as it makes all these changes within its own totality. From top to bottom, these cosmic hierarchies resonate with those qualities of play that exemplify fluidity and malleability, movement and change.

Homeostasis is not especially desirable in these cosmologies because this signifies a balanced state that slows down or ends the processes of transformation, the natural condition of the cosmos. When there are tendencies toward homeostasis in this kind of cosmos, it responds by teetering and slipping—indeed, by imbalancing itself toward continuing processuality. This is like saying that the self-transforming system subverts itself in order to function.

I'd like to illustrate this point with an incident from perhaps the greatest of Indian epics, the *Mahabharata*. The power implicated in this story is that of maya, not lila, but it is maya resonating with the powers of play. The *Mahabharata* is extremely long and convoluted, and the incident I have in mind is considered quite minor, as more of an embellishment to the weighty ideas and strenuous action of the epic. But I think of this little incident in terms of what chaos theory calls the "butterfly effect"—the idea, for example, that "a butterfly stirring the air today in Peking can transform storm systems next month in New York," to quote Gleick (1988, p. 8).

The *Mahabharata* is set in the seam between two great aeons of time as the universe moves into the lowest, the most entropic of these (the *Kaliyuga*), with its increased strife and disintegration of the cosmic weave (Hiltebeitel, 1987, p. 473). The stories of the epic tell of the struggles between two great families of cousins, the five Pandava brothers and their rivals, the Kauravas. The eldest of the five brothers, Yudhisthira, is to be consecrated as a great monarch, the height of majesty, the upholder of moral boundaries, laws, and duties (*dharmaraja*). He is to be the perfect ruler, the perfect regulator of the natural order of the kingdom.

He decides to build a magnificent palace, worthy of his title, and commissions the most eminent of architects to do this.[15] The architect is greatly indebted to the Pandava brothers. Previously, they had saved his life, and he strives to the utmost to carry out the commission. Indeed, he succeeds. The palace is perfection and rivals those of the lesser gods. For that matter, the palace is a model, a microcosm of the cosmos over which the king rules. There is only one little flaw. The architect is a Demon [*asura*], and Demons, like deities, are heavy with the powers of maya. Although doing his very best for the Pandavas, the Demon nonetheless is true to his own transformative nature, and so he cannot help build a few illusions into the structure of the palace.

The king invites his cousins, the Kauravas to visit the palace. All wonder in admiration at its beauty. But one Kaurava, Duryodhana, keeps tripping over the little glitches in this perfection. Where there is a pool, he sees solid floor and falls into the water. Where he sees an entryway, there is only solid surface on which he cracks his head. At each mishap he is mocked, the butt of laughter. His anger grows; his hatred festers. He goes home, schemes revenge, and comes up with a plan to invite the king to play dice. The king loses everything in this game, including himself. The five brothers are forced into lengthy exile. And entropy, the fragmentation and destruction of social and cosmic order, gathers direction and momentum to end eventually in utter holocaust and the annihilation of all. A minor error of perspective, seemingly no more than a prop, contributes to gigantic effects. But whose is the error?

During this era of increasing entropy, the consecration of the perfect ruler is an act of stability, perhaps a striving for homeostasis. It runs counter to, perhaps even blocks, the progressive degeneration of the cosmos during this phase of its devolution. The Demon builds illusion into the palace, into this microcosm of the kingdom. For that matter, he builds change into this stable perfection. Things are not as they seem. Illusion is something that looks like one thing yet is another,

Perhaps it is one thing that not only masks something else but is on its way to becoming that other thing. Illusion is something in process, undergoing change. Illusion is transforming. The architect, true to his own nature and to that of the cosmos, builds imbalance within homeostasis and transforms this seeming stability, tipping it over, setting it into movement that cannot be reversed. Maya, the power of cosmic management and therefore of change, resonating with the messages of play, of lila, keeps the cosmos true to itself, perpetually self-transforming.

Play and Cosmos: Top Down or Bottom Up?

I've argued that the locations of play, of where play is perceived to be embedded in the cosmic order of things, effects its influence. This focus on the locations of play in conceptions of cosmos also opens the way to comparison. Therefore I will conclude by contrasting, in a most preliminary way, play that is top down and play that is bottom up.

In Indian cosmology, play is a top-down idea. Passages to play and their premises are embedded at a high level of abstraction and generality. The qualities of play resonate and resound throughout the whole. But more than this, qualities of play are integral to the very operation of the cosmos. In this regard, to be in play, to partake of the qualities of play, is to be attuned to cosmic processes and their ideals of self-transformation. To be in play is to reproduce time and again the very premises that inform the existence of this kind of cosmos.[16]

Cosmologies are related to cultural ideologies. So too, the processual qualities of play that I have emphasized—fluidity and malleability, movement and change—are deeply embedded in Indian cultural ideologies under a variety of rubrics. As one commentator has noted, "The most striking aspect of play activity in India . . . is its tendency to set in motion, to propel the society forwards by an incessant circulation" (Lannoy, 1971, p. 195).[17]

Now, in cosmologies where premises of play are *not* embedded at a high level, and are *not* integral to the organization of cosmos, the phenomena of play seem to erupt more from the bottom. By bottom-up play I mean that play often is phrased in opposition to, or as a negation of, the order of things. This is the perception of play as unserious, illusory, and ephemeral, but it is also the perception of play as subversive and as resisting the order of things.

To my mind, these descriptions apply to the roles of play in, for example, mainstream monotheistic cosmologies. There, relationships between God and humankind are organized generally in terms of rupture, of absolute difference and hardened boundaries, and of opposites. Frye (1980, p. 11) once commented that the encounter of the God of creation and man as a creative being "seems to be rather like what some of the great poets of nuclear physics have described as the encounter of matter with anti-matter: each annihilates the other." There the premises of play have a role neither in cosmogony nor in the organization of cosmos. Historically, play has survived and at times flourished in these contexts—but almost always from the bottom up.

Bottom-up play has deep roots in monotheistic cosmologies. It has dominated play phenomena even in periods and places, like those of medieval and Renaissance Europe, that scholars hold out as exemplars of the near-cosmic presence of play. For example, the medieval grotesque discussed by Gurevich (1988, pp. 176-210), the Feast of Fools (Gilhus, 1990), and carnival and the carnivalesque (Bakhtin, 1968; Burke, 1978, pp. 178-205; Camporesi, 1988, pp. 47, 51, 208-220; Handelman, 1990; Le Roy Ladurie, 1979) were all perceived to combine qualities of the unserious and the comic, and of confrontation and resistance. Undoubtedly, these instances qualify as bottom-up play, and numerous other examples from these and other periods could be adduced.[18]

In this regard, the subsequent influences of the Reformation, and the emergence of pronounced contrasts between work and play, were not a radical break with the Western past but construed its heritages of play in other rhetorics, other forms.[19] So it is in the present: Theologians of play at the postmodern edge must know that if they desire a dominant metaphysic to emerge from Western heritages of play then they will have to invent it.[20] In the historical developments of monotheistic frameworks, the thrusts of play are strongly from the bottom up.

The bottom-up entry of play into routine living is often a battle for presence, a struggle over space and time devoted to other practices, and a confrontation over legitimacy, apart from special occasions and places that indeed are set apart. So play is often perceived to lurk within the interstices and to spill over from the margins. The effortless, quicksilver qualities of play are always the same, but the epistemological status of these qualities differs radically between cosmologies that embed such qualities at the top of cosmic hierarchy and cosmologies that locate such qualities nearer the bottom.[21]

Top down or bottom up? I'm arguing that there are *essential* qualities of play that make it different from not-play and that these qualities are encoded within passages to play and are reproduced continually with each crossing. Nonetheless, I'm insisting that those aspects of play closer to cultural sensibilities are *contextual*. Thus, the interpretations of play, the meanings of play, the significance of play, and the powers of play are contextual, reflecting the valuations others and ourselves put on essential qualities of play. Play seems rarely to be a neutral idea, as Mechling (1989, pp. 308-310) recently has reminded us. Top down or bottom up? The vision is crude, yet the implications may be telling. Top down or bottom up? Find the passages to play.

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Notes

[1]Some scholars make paradoxical boundaries, like that in between not-play and play, unproblematical. Three examples will suffice. Goffman (1974, pp. 40-46) supposedly built on Bateson's idea of the play frame in order to analyze the shift from not-play to play. Goffman grotesquely turned this into a problem of mechanics: Strips of play, made to mimic strips of not-play, were laid like lumber, strip on strip, through simple alterations in social conventions. Buckley (1983, p. 389) conflated the contents of play realities with the paradox of the play frame and thereby argued that Bateson considered the realities of play to be paradoxical from within. Goffman and Buckley reduced play to forms of not-play, making each continuous with the other. Schechner (1988, p. 16) argued that the "Batesonian play frame is a rationalist attempt to stabilize and localize playing, to contain it safely within definable borders." Schechner complemented Buckley by conflating Bateson's argument on passages to play with the substance of play within play frames. All three ignored the logic of passages to play.

[2]Here paradox is similar to Csikzentmihalyi's (1974) notion of flow. On the perfect praxis of idea and action, see Handelman (1991).

[3]Elsewhere (Handelman, 1990, pp. 63-72) I point to the affinities between play and uncertainty. In this regard, uncertainty is a mode of processuality. Thus the presence of play within ritual signifies changes that the ritual is undergoing, often as part of its structure of intentionality.

[4]Relationships between play and boundary are discussed in Handelman (1981, 1990, pp. 236-265).

[5]Diacritical marks of transliterated Sanskrit terms are omitted in order to ease printing. So too, only the first use of each term is italicized.

[6]Schechner (1988) addressed lila and maya in his own fashion, in a previous address to The Association for the Study of Play.

[7]Ancient Indo-European cosmologies (including those of ancient India) made change integral to their operation. Lincoln (1986) discussed two complementary Indo-European visions of cosmic creation. In one, the body of a primordial being became the raw material from which cosmos was made. In the other, the elements that composed the phenomenal cosmos became the material from which the body of the first man was made. Lincoln (1986, p. 33) argued that each vision was a phase in an encompassing process whereby "whenever the cosmos is created, the body is destroyed, and . . . whenever the body is created, the cosmos is destroyed." Cosmos and body, macrocosm and microcosm were alternative forms of one another, each broken down and transformed into the other (Lincoln, 1986, p. 40). In this kind of cosmos, the only constancy was that of change. Cosmos operated by transforming itself and even by absorbing itself. It constituted a cultural milieu within which ideas of play as a cosmic process gained prominence.

[8]Thus, play is integral to the dynamic relationship between integration and fragmentation that is characteristic of many Indian cosmologies.

[9]Just so, the god Shiva simultaneously is higher and lower, transcendent and immanent in his play, his lilas (see Dessigane, Pattabiramin, & Filliozat, 1960). Thus, "All the time that Shiva made love with Sati [his wife], it was just his divine play, for he was entirely self-controlled and without emotional excitement the whole time . . . when Sati died, Shiva, the great Yogi, wept like a lover in agony, but this is just his divine play, to act like a lover, for in fact he is unconquered and without emotional excitement" (Shiva Purana, quoted in O'Flaherty, 1973, p. 147).

[10]Finding the correct balance in the character of boundaries was an important feature of ancient Indian cosmogonies. There was an emphasis on fluidity and change in the necessity to make adjustments in the quality of boundaries because their creator was imperfect in his creations. Thus the parts of the cosmos might be insufficiently differentiated from one another and, therefore, too similar to one another (*jami*). These boundaries were overly soft and shapeless, so the parts they bounded became joined indiscriminately, losing their distinctiveness and producing cosmic chaos. Or, the parts might be excessively differentiated from one another, thereby lacking all connectivity, and therefore separated and dispersed, without any cohesion (*prthak*). These boundaries were overly rigid, preventing all interaction between parts and producing cosmic chaos. See Smith (1989, pp. 50-69) for an extensive exposition of these ideas.

[11]Just as deities descend through levels and boundaries of cosmos, transforming their shapes and their relevance to cosmic process, so in theory can humans transform themselves into lesser deities in their own right (cf. Parry, 1985).

[12]The Sanskrit term *maya* derives from the same Indo-European root as the Greek term *metis* (Burrow, 1980). These terms have much resonance. Metis refers to cunning intelligence. In versions of cosmology, Metis was a primordial female deity. Among the connotations of metis are fast or incessant movement, swiftness, mobility, shimmering sheen, the power of metamorphosis, and multiplicity. Gods and humans endowed with metis were able to dominate (perhaps manage?) uncertain, fluid, rapidly changing situations (see Detienne & Vernant, 1978, pp. 5-23). In varieties of Hinduism (for example, Shaivism), maya is understood as female.

[13]More so than lila, maya enables the existence of the paradoxical relationships between the transcendent and the immanent deity, who is simultaneously one thing and another. Thus, a Sanskrit text (*Brhadaranyaka Upanisad*, 2.1.20) metaphorizes creation as the spider who weaves the world out of and around itself. Shulman (1985, p. 167) commented, "the god is both the source and the victim of the creative process of weaving a world, maya, in all its beauty and its entangling danger."

[14]The Durkheimian legacy has left two powerful analogies of systemic functioning: the machine and the living organism. Both are misleading if used in conjunction with the concept of the self-transforming system. Machine and organism both depend on functional relationships between parts or organs that exist as permanently defined, autonomous entities. The variability of relationships among parts or organs constitutes the dynamism of these systems. Needham (1965, p. 540) compared the Hindu universe to a perpetual-motion machine. The analogy is partial. Despite the prominence of the body as a microcosm in Indian thought, the self-transforming system must break itself down in order to reconstitute and endure. The equivalent, in terms of machine and organism, would be of one part turning into another—something like a wheel turning into a lever, a heart into a stomach.

[15]The architect's name is transliterated as Maya, meaning *maker*. This is not related etymologically to the transformative power that is transliterated as māyā.

[16]In this kind of self-transformative cosmic framework, experiential contrasts between ritual and play begin to break down. In varieties of Hinduism, ritual as the repair

of the world may be infused with playful moments or may be framed playfully. In abstract terms, these playful moments signify more the operation of cosmic processes and less their subversion. I would add these emendations to my own contrasting of play and ritual (Handelman, 1977, 1987b), and I would emend Henricks (1980) in a similar vein, arguing that his position has more validity in relation to Western perspectives but requires modification in relation to play in self-transforming cosmologies.

[17]During the past 2 decades, an increasing number of scholars have pointed to the significance of ideas of processuality in Indian life. Thus, stasis is undesirable (Das, 1985; Kapferer, 1983 [on Sri Lanka]; Ostor, 1980); personhood, relationships, and matter itself are all perceived as fluid, shifting and mutable (Daniels, 1984; Marriott, 1989, pp. 17-18) while relationships between humans and gods are more continuous (Parry, 1985). Even Dumont's (1970) seemingly rigid structuralism is relevant here, given his great insight that a hierarchical system based on difference (he discussed caste) is extremely flexible, elastic, and internally expandable, so long as hierarchical relationships are maintained continuously throughout the system. None of these studies conceptualize processuality as play, yet qualities of play are very close to an ethos of processuality that informs much of the recent scholarship on India. Process as play, and play as process, are embedded deeply not only in cosmology but also more indirectly in Indian cultural ideologies.

[18]Even within the carnivalesque world created by Rabelais, the most playfully subversive is more a bottom-up phenomenon. Thus, although both Gargantua and his son Pantagruel are bottom-up characters, the circumstances of their respective births point to the production of the playfully subversive as more bottom up. Gargantua cannot exit naturally through his mother's birth canal and must find another aperture. Forced higher (against his will, one might say), he emerges through her left ear (Putnam, 1955, p. 69)—in other words, through her head. For all his excesses, he becomes a scholar and subsidizer of a utopian, humanistic community. Covered in fur, Pantagruel is born from his mother's belly, killing her in childbirth (Putnam, 1955, p. 237). Pantagruel is even more subversive than his father. Within the entirety of this carnivalesque world, the playful is graduated in increasing degrees of subversion, from top to bottom—in keeping therefore with Western monotheisms. I am indebted to John McClelland for pointing me to these births.

[19]I take issue with the view that the development of Protestantism was a necessary condition for the emergence of play as subversion and resistance in Western cosmologies (cf. Norbeck, 1971; Turner, 1974). Though this was a significant contributing factor, such conceptions of play are associated more with cosmologies that are not self-transformative and that include Western monotheisms, as these developed long before the Reformation.

[20]See Miller (1970). This is no less so for scholars of performance who endow play with universal meanings of seduction (see Schechner, 1988).

[21]In discussion, Beverly Stoeltje raised the question of whether top-down and bottom-up play could be related to the gender of cosmic principles or deities. Though the issue is important, I can only offer some brief thoughts. I associated top-down play with self-transformative cosmic systems, which are approximated by varieties of Hinduism. Hinduism has highly elaborated goddess traditions in which the female may be understood as ultimate reality. In the post-Vedic *Markandeya Purana* (5th–6th century C.E.), male deity is described on occasion as an emanation of the female (Coburn, 1985, p. 80). More radically, the Goddess is described as encompassing her own female principle (Coburn, 1985, pp. 137, 147) and, one may add, as being complete in herself. This suggests that there may be greater interchangeability of male and female in self-transformative cosmic systems (this seems to be so in varieties of classical Hinduism; cf. Zimmer, 1972, p. 123). If play is integral to such systems, this will be activated as easily by female principles as by male, and top-down cosmic play need not be gender-specific.

Compare this to the ruptures in Western monotheisms between creativity and cosmogenesis (the preserve of male deity) on the one hand, and procreativity and reproduction (a female preserve) on the other (Weigle, 1989, pp. 60-61). This division of labor is hierarchical (high/low, spiritual/earthy), and there is little interchangeability of deity in terms of gender. One should ask whether there is any tendency to identify bottom-up play with female figures (or with inversions of the male). Consider, too, the 13th-century Gugliemites who envisioned salvation through the female—with female cardinals under a female pope, the vicaress of a female Holy Spirit, incarnated in order to establish a new Church. The sect was exterminated by the inquisition (Wessley, 1978).

Acknowledgments

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