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The Genesis of Animal Play

Testing the Limits

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Foreword

Scholars of all kinds have been seriously at work now for more than one hundred years trying to figure out the meaning of play and its function in animals and humans. The most interesting shift in theoretical opinion over this time has been that the earliest theories emphasized the commonalities of man and animal. Play, it was said, recapitulated the behavior of earlier species and as such was often animal-like, a not very pleasant activity with all its rough contests, its bullying and hazing of the less fortunate, its gross rhymes and joking, its gambling, and its often quite nasty fancifulness. It was also seen as a largely childhood preoccupation which with God's grace could be grown out of during the adolescent years. A century later, however, we are told primarily that play is a voluntary undertaking that reflects the creativity of young children, including their improvisations, their imaginations, and their cognitive, social, and emotional development. Furthermore, even though adults are now seen to spend much of their lives in recreation and entertainments, these activities, it is said, present them with opportunities to discover true play within their own higher level experience of these activities. This "true" or even "pure" play can be characterized in aesthetic terms, or can be seen as a kind of self-actualization, or trance experience that lifts the individual player out of life's usual mediocrity onto a higher religious plane. What seems very clear is that in these advocacies play has become something of a secular consumer luxury—a kind of conspicuous consumption once talked about by Veblen in material terms (as the wealthy playing with their horses and their yachts), but now addressed in more ontological or meditational terms as a luxury of the personal spirit. Unfortunately, those more concerned with the science of play than with these metaphysical properties have found it a continuing bafflement.

In these circumstances we are fortunate to have Gordon Burghardt's *The Genesis of Animal Play* return us once again to consider more carefully our relationship to animals in order to discover more factually who we are in our playing selves. In this he has rendered those who are less familiar with the biological, neural, and evolutionary aspects of play a great service. This is such a comprehensive, careful, and even graceful scholarly coverage that it shines light on the field much as was done by Robert Fagen

in his earlier monumental coverage of 1981. Fagen sought to show that the key to play was its flexibility. In my own work I have emphasized play as adaptive potentiation or adaptive variability (1997). But what Burghardt now makes more clear and more specific is that play both originates from and creates *surplus resources*, any or all of which may be used on subsequent occasions. And what he does in the rest of the book is detail what these resources are in a full variety of more ancient creatures—some not hitherto known to be playful. His work now becomes the map within which any scholars who take seriously their own efforts to understand the universality of play have to establish their own probability of being other than a surplus resource.

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