

## Rhetorics of Fate

Vicissitudes of fortune, which spares neither man nor the proudest  
of his works, which buries empires and cities in a common grave.  
*Edward Gibbon*

Children are a lottery in the modern concept of progress.  
*after Frech*

The ancient rhetorics of play, fate, power, identity, and frivolity are so called because they are of more ancient origin than the modern rhetorics, progress, the imaginary, and the self. The latter three can be traced to major historical concepts of the past two hundred years, those being the Enlightenment, romanticism, and individualism, while the ancient rhetorics have antecedents throughout history. But there are additional differences as well. **The ancient rhetorics tend to be about groups rather than individuals.** And in general, those who believe in one or more of the modern rhetorics of play tend to discount the ancient rhetorics as play forms. In part this is because the older rhetorics are less socialized, more crude, and less in synchrony with modern rational life, though this is somewhat more true of fate and frivolity than of power and identity. Nevertheless the violence of the power rhetorics and the carnivalesque quality of the rhetorics of identity are also often seen as beyond the pale of civilized credibility, as are the excesses of gambling and the travesties of folly. **Additionally, these older forms of play are typically more obligatory than they are optional. They therefore offend the modern sensibility that play must be associated with voluntariness.** The ancient rhetorics have more extrinsic motivation about them and imply that play can

be coercive. The modern rhetorics state, contrarily, that play is an exercise of freedom. But to admit that play can be coercive is to deprive "freedom" of its legitimacy as a universal definition, so many moderns would prefer the alternative of denying that gambling and football and carnival are really play at all; they can be called addiction, violence, and orgy instead. There is also a deep reluctance to associate children with any of these ancient rhetorics. The point of view taken in this work, however, is that all of the rhetorics, whether modern or ancient, are based on or are simulacra of play forms, and all should be taken into account in any truly empirical examination of the character and functioning of play.

The first rhetoric of the ancient group, the rhetoric of fate, is the most pervasive of all play rhetorics but the least publicly ideologized in modern times. It is at the heart of the most ancient of religions (animism and mysticism) and is at the deepest level of even modern minds, because life and death are, after all, fateful, not rational and not escapable. This chapter deals with various forms of fate as play, such as the attributions that the gods are at play, that the universe is at play, that our brains are at play, and finally that we are creatures of the play of fortune and luck, as exemplified by games of chance. There is a sense in which the irrevocability of fate leaves no answers except the most desperate and universal of human answers, which is that one might perhaps escape by luck or its personified equivalent, God's favor. Luck is very much fate's last hope. It is the play of the last chance. It is the play of everyman. Though pitiful, it is the only recourse in the mortal situation, unless of course we really do rise by works rather than by grace. From a secular point of view, then, to be mortal is ultimately to be without hope, but in the game model of this predicament, there is a slight lottery like hope. The odds, though long, might occasionally be with us in the more confined worldly domain of chance. In this sense it is useful to think of games of chance not only as models of the irrevocability of fate but also as fate fantasied (though in Florida, as they say, the probability of winning the state lottery is the same as the chance of being hit by lightning three times—but then, as they also say, there is a lot of lightning in Florida).

Perhaps it can be said that the ones who lose at games of chance are at least playfully in control of the circumstances of their own



losing. This is the definition of play—the illusion of mastery over life's circumstances—once offered by the great scholar of child play, Erik Erikson. In his words, the purpose of play is “to hallucinate ego mastery” (1956, p. 185). If such “illusory mastery” is indeed the spirit or motivation behind adults’ play in games of chance, as it is an account of children’s play, then it is surely a definition of play that escapes the limitations of the progress rhetoric. Play as an irrational act of gaining pleasure through one’s own illusions is hardly consistent with the rationality of the rhetoric of progress. Of course if children and gamblers were put in a separate category of existence, then progressivists would not regard this reference to “illusion” as the ultimate definition of play. The discontinuity between adult and child play would be a discontinuity between rational adults and the collective group of irrational gamblers and nonrational children. Given the laws and prohibitions against gamblers and children throughout Western history, this negative collective category of children and gambling adults has actually existed, even though the groups are seldom theoretically linked in the present mordant way.

But calling the masteries of play in childhood or adulthood forms of hallucination or illusion is itself an epistemological discourse that implies something defective about them. This discourse implies that those who master their lives in more realistic ways are more mature or more adequate persons, and this may or may not be empirically true. Given that there is nothing more characteristic of human achievement than the creation of illusory cultural and theoretical worlds, as in music, dance, literature, and science, then children’s and gamblers’ full participation in such play worlds can be seen not as a defect, or as compensation for inadequacy, but rather as participation in a major central preoccupation of humankind. The modern computer-age habit of calling these “virtual worlds” rather than illusory worlds highlights this move toward a more positive, if narrower, epistemological attitude about their function. As we now see the creation of human meanings as central to human culture, we can give more primary appreciation to these manifestations in our artists, our children, and our gamblers (Hymes, 1974). We might borrow from Steiner the view that the issue is no longer whether there is superior reality versus inferior play, but whether the play is itself merely ordinary or a case of “brilliant virtuality” (1995). The rhetoric of fate is a

real threat to the rhetoric of progress, because the concept of virtuality promises to put adults and children in the same ludic world.

## The Play of the Gods

I move now to an array of examples in which play exemplifies not our own autonomy but our being controlled by some fate. The concept that play originates in the activities of the gods is well illustrated by O’Flaherty, who says, in her book *Dreams, Illusion and Other Realities* (1984), “This is a book about myths, dreams and illusion. It is about the ways in which they are alike, the ways in which they are different, and what each teaches us about reality. Transformations of one sort or another are the heart of myths” (p. 3). She goes on to show how, in Hindu mythology, the world is at play in the hands of the gods, and dreaming and playfulness are forms of reality treated as seriously as the so-called commonsense world. Play, like dreams, is not a secondary state of reality as it is with us but has primacy as a form of knowing. O’Flaherty says: “In India the realm of mental images is not on the defensive. Commonsense has a powerful lobby there, as it has with us, but it does not always have everything its own way. Reality has to share the burden of proof with unreality in India, and it is by no means a foregone conclusion that reality will win” (p. 304).

Handelman (1992) brings these ideas to bear on the issue of play when he says:

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. To be in play is to reproduce time and again the very premises that inform the existence of this kind of cosmos . . . Now in cosmologies where premises of play are not embedded at a high level and are not integral to the organization of the cosmos, as in Western society, the phenomenon of play seems to erupt 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 resisting the order of things. (p. 12)



Schechner (1988), beginning with the same Hindu materials as O'Flaherty and extrapolating probably from his own iconoclastic career in theater direction, suggests that if we look more closely at Western play, particularly what he calls "dark play" and that I have called elsewhere "cruel play" (Sutton-Smith, 1982f) and the "masks of play" (Sutton-Smith and Kelly-Byrne, 1984), there are some strong similarities with the Indian tradition. He agrees that for moderns play has low status, whereas in Hindu metaphysics it is indeed the divine process of creation; and whereas for moderns play is framed as not real, for Hindus it is one of multiple realities, all transformable into each other. However, when he shifts this discourse from a concern with metaphysical and cultural forms to the more ontological or psychological plane, then it is possible to see modern parallels between our own play behavior, particularly in what he calls our dark play, and that of the Hindus. Thus while Handelman might wish to deny it, Schechner contends that playing is for us, as for the Hindus,

a creative destabilizing action that frequently does not declare its existence, even less its intentions . . . Playing is a mood, an attitude, a force. It erupts or one falls into it. It may persist for a long time as specific games, rites, and artistic performances do—or it comes and goes suddenly—a wisecrack, an ironic glimpse of things, a bend or crack in behavior . . . [I]t's wrong to think of playing as the interruption of ordinary life. Consider instead playing as the underlying, always there, continuum of experience . . . Ordinary life is netted out of playing but play continually squeezes through even the smallest holes of the work net . . . work and other activities constantly feed on the underlying ground of playing, using the play mood for refreshment, energy, unusual ways of turning things around, insights, breaks, opening and especially looseness. (1988, pp. 16–18)

Here we have Schechner borrowing from his readings in Hindu metaphysics an interpretation of play as a highly transforming and powerful, often irrational experience, which he apparently presumes to be universal. In this he goes beyond **the typical Western tradition of play interpretation**, although there are some scholars who are attempting to do similar things within Western theology. They believe that the Christian God can be seen as a creative player (Berger, 1969; Miller, 1969; Moltmann, 1972; Nemoianu and Royal, 1992). But on

closer analysis they seem to be talking about a fairly rational creator, whereas Schechner, like Nietzsche, has a fairly irrational and secular player in mind. In sum, while in part accepting Handelman's dichotomy of up and down, Schechner injects into the bottom-up Western psychological play attitude a more comprehensive and heteronomous theory of play's role than Handelman's cultural bottom-up implies.

On Schechner's behalf it might be added that dreams, daydreams, and illusions could be included as a part of his bottom-up view in Western thought, particularly as this seems to be the case neurologically, as it will be shown later. There is enough known about these oneiric phenomena to see that they have a kind of pervasiveness and automaticity of their own. They do seem to resist attempts to make the good things in life always a part of conscious control and choice. They constantly present us with other images of ourselves that seem to persist despite our desire to the contrary, so that even if we are usually reluctant to give dreams the ontological status of play, they do constantly permeate our thinking—and it is not certain that when this happens it is not itself a kind of play of mind. What makes interpretation more difficult is that what permeates minds day by day, "the underlying, always there, continuum of experience," is usually referred to as daydreaming, reverie, or rumination. Is play to be the name for all of these, as Schechner implies? Or is play to be only the more active next step that is taken willfully with these daydreams, to turn them into controlled fantasies or imaginings? There is truly a sense in which a mind plays its own recordings and has its own streams of consciousness, very little of which is actively under control. But human passivity in these respects contrasts with the active nature usually attributed to waking play and usually thought to be essential to most modern definitions of play. One can see how the passivity or receptivity of the Hindu in face of the metaphysical universe at play could mingle quite easily with the Hindu ontological sense of the individual mind at daydreaming play. Play could then be thought to be mainly a phenomenon to be experienced top down rather than actively manipulated bottom up. Typical Western definitions, by contrast, make the player a more entrepreneurial kind of being. And this allows Westerners to divide off the "daydream stuff" as a less credible part of the mind. But Schechner's alternative suggests that if the



Western concept of play, no matter how controlling, does rest on a bedrock of dreams, that would be a much more comprehensive bottom-up idea than most modern play theorists have in mind. A further advantage of Schechner's broad view might be that it could help account for the way in which players quickly become highly absorbed in their own play. The message "this is play" lets go a flood of internally instigated emotion and involvement. The continuity between such impelling automata and the more behavioral matters of play might well account for the ever present and sudden surge of ready engagement in virtual play experience.

Without confusing Schechner's ontological usage with the Hindu metaphysical usage, it can be proposed that the breadth of play he suggests for these secular nonmythic times provides a *broad play* rhetoric. In what follows, the modern broad play rhetoric will be presented as one that encompasses all the mind materials of dreams, daydreams, tropes, and active play forms. Contrarily the *narrow play* rhetoric will speak for the more limited rhetorics of progress, power, identity, and the self in this book. Briefly, these can be called the broad and narrow versions of play. **In the broad version, everything is play that is clearly not of an immediate adaptive usefulness. In the narrow version, nothing is play unless contemporaneously so named.** Most things, in this narrow version, are not play. Dreams are dreams, daydreams are daydreams, imagination is imagination (though it can become imaginative play), spectators are just spectators of someone else playing, and metaphors are simply figures of speech, unless we actually play with them. Children do many things that are not play, such as exploring, practicing, exercising, learning, imitating, problem solving, and all the art activities that are art, not play.

### The Universe at Play

The broader definition, in which either the gods or our own brains influence us playfully beyond our control, has about it an externality not likely to be popular in modern everyday parlance. Of similar externality are those views of the universe that see it too as being at play. In the hard sciences the concept of play is constantly being applied as a metaphor or a metaphysic to handle the inconstancy, indeterminism, unpredictability, or chaos of basic physical processes

throughout the universe. There is a daunting similarity between some of these views of the universe and some of the ways neurologists are beginning to talk about the brain. They are, universe and brain, both more or less beyond control, and all one can do is try to understand the rules by which they operate. Perhaps one of the fascinations of games of chance is that they mirror both physical nature and human nature more adequately than we want to believe.

I am grateful for Spariosu's assemblage of the play theories of the play-oriented Nobel Prize-winning physical scientists, and I quote here briefly from his extended accounts (1989). Jacques Monod contends that "life on earth is entirely a matter of chance . . . essentially unpredictable" (p. 217). Eigen and Winkler state that "everything that happens in our world resembles a vast game in which nothing is determined in advance but the rules, and only the rules are open to objective understanding . . . chance and necessity underlie all events. The history of play goes back to the beginnings of time . . . **chance and rules are the elements of play.** Once begun by the elementary particles, atoms, molecules, play is carried on by our brain cells. Man did not invent play. But it is 'play and only play that makes man complete'" (p. 224). Erwin Schrodinger goes considerably further when he sees science itself as belonging to the play sphere, not just driven by the logic of adaptation: "Play, art and science are the spheres of human activity where the action and aim are not rule determined by the aims imposed by the necessities of life" (p. 275). For Schrodinger, science is a rhetorical product of its age no less than all the other ideological rhetorics of the particular time and place. Werner Heisenberg takes a similar position on the comparability of art (and play) and science, as complementary modes of knowledge. The most playful of modern science philosophers, however, is Paul Feyerabend, who likens science to the play of infants with language: **"It is a bricolage of experimentation . . . initial playful activity is an essential prerequisite of the final act of understanding . . . new scientific practice needs time to develop its conceptual tools and its empirical data by playing with them, that is, by constantly repeating and combining them until they become common usage or reality"** (p. 295).

In his analysis Spariosu is able to show that even with this openness of science to the metaphor of play, the majority of the scientific

philosophers are still dominated by a rational and progressive view of how science and art or play will proceed together. Like Kant and Schiller, they do not really allow for imagining as a subversive activity or allow themselves to be seriously attracted to an irrational view of the universe. Even Feyerabend, who comes closest to Nietzsche's view of the playful universe as a constant struggle between antagonistic powers, is still more moderate than Nietzsche. In his own pluralistic and idealistic notion of a postscientific world, Feyerabend suggests there can be balance, with different subcultural powers observing a certain amount of fair play in relation to each other.

### The Neurological Player

These externalist and broad views of play have some parallel in modern neurological theory. In chapter 2, I quoted Sacks's speculation that the brain is engaged in a ceaseless inner talking that is like fantasy. In his view, playful states have a priority and an indeterminism of their own in our brain, not unlike the above-described views of the gods or the physical universe at play. Sacks's account also seems to provide a neurological basis for the broad views of play suggested by Schechner. For brevity's sake I will call my construction of his account the theory of *neural fabulation*, meaning that the brain is always creating some kind of ceaseless inner fiction, or is at play within itself.

A similar connotation for brain activity can be derived from Edelman's work, although he doesn't talk specifically about play. In *Bright Air, Brilliant Fire* (1992) he conceives of life in the brain as like life in the jungle: each response to external stimuli is a process of natural selection, with those cells that clone most adequately to that stimulus surviving, but most of them dying. The mind he envisages arising from this jungle is a correlator of myriad interactive neuronal loops and layers. It is a mind in which 80 percent of the action is inward, driven by the gene-based survivals of history as well as by the contingencies of its individualized memory and the existential moment. By correlating everything relevant in response to the urgencies of its own experience, it has the greatest chance of adequate circuits of responsivity. Thus it "dreams" ceaselessly along the correlated lines of its own experience and value. It is tempting to see this partly as another way of talking about neural fabulation. It is possible also to

see this kind of correlator process as a model for informal play, for at best, within play's protean character, the player can pretend almost anything and connect almost anything with anything else. Such lability is one of play's most noted characteristics. Furthermore play seems usually to be driven by the novelties, excitements, or anxieties that are most urgent to the players. Put in these terms, play might imitate the fluidity and value-driven character of the mind's own internal processing, but with a transference to the agencies, agents, acts, and spatiotemporal scenes of the external world. Play is, as it were, a halfway house between the night and the day, the brain and the world. And as such it chatters to itself with the kind of unpredictable relevance and irrelevance that the dream life does, though aided somewhat by the rules and structures of the external world within which social, if not solitary, play is mostly cast. This *correlator brain model* is certainly a neat anthropomorphism for the theory of play as broad rather than narrow and passive as well as active. In this thesis those other voices in play may not be those of God, nor those of the external universe, but they are certainly the voices from within one's own head, though perhaps that is indeed the same thing.

Still, the analogy as stated here is quite fuzzy. The neurologist Damasio, in *Descartes' Error* (1994), provides a way to make the focus a little tighter. He points out that we, with our complex human brains, have a greater appreciation of external circumstances (accuracy), more refined responses (precision), and a better ability to predict the future through imagined scenarios than do lower animal life forms. In these areas, our brain's adaptability in the Edelman "jungle" drives it toward specific forms of learning. But as well as these adaptive forms of knowing, the human brain has the correlating capability that Edelman mentions, the ability to represent all relevant aspects of structure and function in basic and current detail (Damasio, *ibid.*, p. 229). The question is why the correlator, which provides all this useful circuitry of an accurate, precise, and predictive nature, must also continue to fabulate its way through nighttime dreams and daytime fantasies. The answer I might offer, to complete this grand sketch of the neurological player, is that if the brain didn't keep itself labile, it might rigidify in terms of its prior specific adaptive successes. Sustaining its motivation for generality could be seen as the price of eternal alertness. The correlator must not rest, or it could be faulted by specialization. From



this, if we are reckless, we might extrapolate that play, whether of the inner mind or outer behavior, becomes a self-rewarding process that keeps this holistic capacity in a state of alertness. Dreams exist to amuse the brain into continued labile alertness. Play exists to amuse the body to the same consummation of wholeness in a virtual world.\* Both dreams and play, in these terms, exist primarily to provide motivation to sustain a holistic state of mind and body. What we see in everyday play, in these terms, is a worldly refraction of the motivation of a holistic brain. Play is the daytime refraction of the holistic brain. Though neither Edelman nor Damasio writes of play, they both provide the kind of neurological descriptions that prompt us to see a brain at play that is as universal as that kind of play envisaged for the gods, and for the physical universe. While it is true that none of these speculations and parallels is likely to last, the autonomy of the brain as a primal player seems likely to do so.

### Dreams and Play

It would help such a neurological thesis, of course, if the parallel between dreams and play could be clearly established. But the intricacy of this research enterprise is baffling, and given the complexity and obscurity of both dream and play processes, there is only the hope of success at present. Still, the available parallels are positive. Obviously one is of the night and the other of the day. Obviously, too, the dream does not have to contend with the immediacies of waking, even though it does contend with the postscripts of waking. The dreamer, by and large, exercises no great power over dreaming, it being a largely automatic and irrevocable neural process; the player, however, has considerable control to start and stop, even he or she does not have too much control over the desired content. At the same time, the normal presence of dream and play is associated with general mental health, and their interruption is linked with dysfunction. They are both seen as recuperative, restitutive, and refructifying. Theories of dreams often parallel those for play, as in the claim that dreams are forms of memory consolidation, stress adaptation,

\*The "body" here is the "body-mind" in Damasio's sense, as described in *Descartes' Error* (New York: Grosset-Putnam, 1994).

mood regulation, wish fulfillment, problem solving, and anticipation (Hunt, 1989). Similarly synesthesia is characteristic of the imagery in both, as discussed by Werner and Kaplan in their work *Symbol Formation* (1963). Both also seem to afford a unitary existential synthesis between person and reality that is less obvious in everyday circumstances. And both have been associated in a variety of empirical ways with measures of creativity, though the data here are still inconclusive. All of these positive items certainly add up at least to the view that it is not absurd to think there is a connection between the character of dreams and the character of play. The Singers sum it up in their book *The House of Make-Believe* (1992) when they write: "What little systematic data we have comparing the waking and sleeping thought streams suggests that if we subtract the on-task logical thought that characterizes waking thought and is infrequent during sleep, we find a continuity in structure and content" (p. 283). This commentary makes tenable the view that there is a connection between the passivity and involuntary character of dreams and the passivity and involuntariness of many kinds of play. The active forms of play rise, as it were, from this groundswell of incessant and relatively involuntary mental play. Dreams and play are perhaps as appetitive for the mind as are food and sex for the body.

### Neonatal Ludicism

From another source of research also apparently close to the brain we gather that the characteristics of childhood immaturity may have a logic other than that of ignorance and incompetence. For example, Bjorklund and Green (1992) show that preschool children are innately unrealistically optimistic. They are not put off by failure. Until about the age of four years, they overestimate their own skill, and their own memory. Their optimism makes them persistent and keeps them continuing to learn despite their incompetence. Furthermore their very egocentricity, a negative in the Piagetian scheme of things, means that they learn better and remember more adequately things associated with their self-centered selves. If not for all their parallel monologues with other children, they might never discover that the others are present and require some consideration. Reversible thinking, it is argued, is ultimately assisted at this age by narcissistic involve-

ment. Again, young children's lability and lack of differentiation make them hyperreactive to all salient stimuli; this may be one of the reasons for their remarkably speedy retention of all the languages in their environment, and perhaps it also accounts for their remarkably rapid acquisition of video-game skills, an area in which they typically outscore their elders.

It is possible to propose that these "neonatal" characteristics are not confined to the young but can be true at all age levels. **Players need to be unrealistically optimistic, egocentrically motivated, and flexibly reactive (hyperreactive) to their play situation to be on top of it.** Eighty-year-old golfers know very well that they can no longer reduce or even maintain their handicap; yet they go forth each day optimistically determined to perform better than the last time. Despite a lifetime of failure, they persist, selectively and egocentrically, remembering their occasional victories; they are unrealistically optimistic. Beneath the etiquette of play there is also self-centered concern with personal victory or personal fantasy. The thought that "we're number one" reigns in the hearts of all players and their supporters. "Look at me, look at me," says the four-year-old endlessly, as she jumps into the water or claims to be swimming. "Did you hear this one?" asks the old man at the bar, as he tells his latest or oldest fishing story. In addition, all social play requires extremely alert attention—to the context of play, the actions, the equipment, the field, and the other players. The best players are magnificently reactive to novel stimulus opportunities, and their ecstasy may lie in the performance of unique ludic acts, whether in ball games, at the chess table, at poker, or in jumping out of trees.

So the peculiar association between play and growth in early childhood, when it appears to assist maximal growth, in later years perhaps remains the possession of maturing persons who are still revived in everyday affairs by the optimism, egocentricity, and hyperreactivity with which they pursue their ludic activities. Looked at from the point of view of the player, who actively practices the fantasy of what is considered possible, the terms *enactive subactivity* and *optimistic ludicism* appear very similar, although the former describes the acting out of possible play actions and the latter places these in the context of the roles of optimism, egocentricity, and lability in evolution. One might also say that the player of games of chance is an extreme case of one who refuses to believe that failure cannot be overcome.

## The Player of Fate and Fortune

In the twentieth century the notions of progress and scientific rationality are so pervasive it is hard to realize that most humans, in prior eras and in most parts of the world still today, are more preoccupied with fate than they are with progress. The rhetoric of progress has a slim hold compared with the widespread rhetorics of fate and the exercises of divination, prayer, superstition, and gambling, through which attempts to influence fate are carried out.

In play, the ludic concern to receive the rewards of fate is exercised through the innumerable games of chance. As Roger Caillois puts it in his excellent account, *Man, Play and Games* (1961), these chance games are

all games that are based on a decision independent of the player, an outcome over which he has no control, and in which winning is the result of fate rather than triumphing over an adversary. More properly destiny is the sole artisan of victory, and where there is rivalry what is meant is that the winner has been more favored by fortune than the loser. Perfect examples of this type are provided by the games of dice, roulette, heads or tails, baccarat, lotteries, etc. . . . [Chance] signifies and reveals the favor of destiny. The player is entirely passive: he does not deploy his resources, skill, muscles, intelligence. All he need do is await, in hope and trembling, the cast of the die . . . [Chance] negates work, patience, experience, qualifications . . . [it] grants the lucky player infinitely more than he could procure by a lifetime of labor, discipline, and fatigue. It seems an insolent and sovereign insult to merit. (p. 17)

Recourse to chance helps people tolerate competition that is unfair or too rugged. At the same time it leaves hope in the dispossessed that free competition is still possible in the lowly stations of life. (p. 115)

There is a slight note of hysteria in this account, undoubtedly reflecting the generally negative attitude toward gamblers that has been a part of the past several centuries and that dominates most literature on games of chance or gambling. Now that so much gambling has been normalized, the participation of the masses is not



quite so desperate as this account suggests, even if it is indeed a form of regressive taxation and accounts for an upsurge of addictions anonymous (Clotfelter and Cook, 1989). Furthermore, there is a great deal more insidious shrewdness, if not strategy, in many of these chance games than is always obvious on the surface. Caillois overemphasizes the passivity of the games. Still, given the omnipresence of progress rhetorics in modern life among the skillful and successful, it is not surprising that positive rhetorics for fate, fortune, chance, and gambling are found only in a minor key, despite the fact that more money is spent on these kinds of games than on all of the others combined. The estimate of \$400 billion spent annually on such "playful" activities in the United States exceeds the combined total for all the other forms of play, as well as the defense budget. More people visit casinos than attend baseball games (Hirshey, 1994). In the United States, the older work-ethic rhetoric, which discounted gambling as a form of abnormality and often illegality, is gradually giving way to a consumer-oriented rhetoric in which legal forms of gambling are dubiously rationalized as harmless entertainment contributing money to the common welfare, as eliminating illegal gambling, and as stimulating city redevelopment (Abt et al., 1985). Current study seems to indicate that these claims are overly optimistic but are not without some validity in some locations (Peterson, 1995). However, even in this positive capitalistic vein, little attention is given to the value of games of chance in providing players with excitement and escape from everyday routine, as well as their being a way of enjoying the company of others in activities of circumscribed risk. While games of chance are being accepted into the ideology of the modern state, there is still reluctance to admit such games as a healthy form of play. The practice is said to be economically justified, but the pleasure of the players is seldom mentioned. In general there is no public play rhetoric for the play itself.

Something more needs to be said here about the conflict between modern religion and the rhetoric of fate. The historical and anthropological material show that they were once often tied together in ritual practice and festivals (Stallybrass and White, 1986). However, modern chance games and modern festivals have fallen away from religion and become secularized. Yet one can see that, along with all forms of play, they both still provide experiences of "otherness,"

"alterity," or "altered states of consciousness." And these or similar states of mind are as essential to religious ritual and prayer as they are to game involvement. In both cases one becomes "lost" in the experience and thus transcends everyday cares and concerns. It is worth considering that because the two (religion and play) are in modern times so separate, they are in effect rivals for the promotion of such altered states of consciousness. Which means they are rivals for the positive qualities that such alterity provides. One can say of both religion and play that they make life worth living and make everyday activities meaningful, because of the transcendence that they propose, one eternal and one mundane. Perhaps the unwillingness to attribute such experiential transcendence to games of fate exists not just because games of fate are heretical to the work ethic but because, through sharing transcendence with religion, they are actually rivals for its value. Believers are willing to acknowledge that religion has made their lives meaningful, but players are hesitant to say the same of their games, even though their endless obsession with those games suggests that this is indeed the case. This confines play to a secondary epistemological status. Players seldom say that if it weren't for their play their life would be meaningless. But this downgrading of play is a habit of Western self-conception rather than a necessary truth. One may suppose that with the development of the rhetoric of "optimal experience" (the rhetoric of the self), secular civilization may be gradually transforming itself to the point that it can indeed admit that play is as fundamental to life as are survival and religion. *The Feast of Fools* by Harvey Cox (1969) harbors just such an aspiration.

Because Abt and colleagues (1985) have found that the majority of players gamble moderately and with positive results for family life and pleasure, this strongly suggests that the copious psychological literature that focuses on only the pathological gambler is misleading as an account of the meaning of these kinds of play to ordinary people. Furthermore the puritanical unwillingness to entertain the idea that games of chance and gambling are indeed almost universal and normal forms of human play is part and parcel of a **progress-oriented need to see play narrowly, as active and intrinsically motivated**. The normality of such chance play actually suggests that it is quite possible for play to be both extrinsically motivated by anticipated rewards and



relatively passive, as the players contribute very little to the outcome in some forms (lotteries, bingo, roulette). It is also possible for play to be much more active in other chance forms, such as various card games, particularly poker, which is a mixture of both chance and strategy. Furthermore both kinds of chance, active and reactive, are exciting forms of active fantasy as well as a direct experience of risk taking.

In sum, one can argue that chance play finds its motive in the excited arousal that it brings, regardless of whether this is personally activated, as in physical skill and strategy games, or impersonally activated, as in games of chance. What this might well also imply is that games of chance are a good metaphor for the other kinds of phenomena discussed in this chapter. These phenomena also picture the events and outcomes of play as originating outside the player, as when the gods are at play, the physical universe is at play, or the brain itself is (constantly) at play. Which is to say that luck can become a metaphor for fate (Rescher, 1995). **Given that gambling phenomena are the original source of probability theory, which is the statistical method for analyzing the indeterminacy of most worldly things, it is as reasonable to see gambling as a metaphor for life as it is to count progress as such a metaphor** (Gigerenzer et al., 1989). In this chapter, I am attempting to move toward a more cogent rhetoric for the kind of chance play events described, because, unlike in the other chapters, there is as yet no overall theory or rhetoric that adequately illustrates the breadth of the varied indeterminist and externalist matters involved.

## Validations and Definitions

Several points might serve as validation for such a rhetoric of fate. First, the historical origins of the rhetoric of fate lie in our primitive desire to control the circumstances of life through magic and prayer. There is a broad and ancient history of cultural attempts to exercise such control through divination and magic and luck. Chance and gambling continue to carry on the spirit of these earlier forms of religiosity, but their contribution to modern well-being is still not as much acknowledged as the obsession with them suggests might be the case.

Advocates of a rhetoric of fate are those who own the gambling casinos and control sites of gambling, and they are churchmen and statesmen who see gambling as a way of raising money for their own charities and political institutions. The allegiance of the masses to these games is largely expressed with the rhetoric of their feet and their money as they frequent betting parlors, lottery windows, and, increasingly, casinos.

The play forms include games of chance, as well as betting on sports and any other events of uncertain outcome. There are multiple forms: slot machines, table games, pari-mutuel betting, horse racing, off-track betting, greyhound racing, jai alai, card games, bingo, legal bookmaking. And then there are the different games themselves: black jack, craps, roulette, baccarat, *Wheel of Fortune*, keno, pai gow, poker, and panguingui to mention a very small sample.

The players are players and gamblers who participate at levels from the simple (bingo) to the more complex (poker). But as Abt and colleagues (1985) point out, there are many kinds of players. They can be casual, occasional, risk-taking, professional, habitual, serious, obsessive, or compulsive, and each type of player has a different kind of play history and level of participation. All except the compulsive are more or less in control of their lives. The science behind the rhetoric of fate, the science that the players use, is the mathematics of probability theory.

**Fate, with its emphasis on luck rather than talent, is the antithesis to the rhetoric of progress.** As such it has been, and often is, an anathema to those who see life as manageable only in some rational or religious way. In an attempt to keep games of chance out of their lives, and out of their children's lives, the bourgeois have typically banned the games and any rhetorics speaking in their favor. The rhetoric of gambling has been a solidly negative rhetoric of avoidance for the past several hundred years in the West. At this present time, however, there is some moderation of the negative rhetoric. The virtues of state lotteries and selected casinos as sources of income to be used in charitable ways have become positive rhetorics, although these are now being counterbalanced by negative rhetorics that argue that new groups of low-income players are ruining themselves and their families through gambling addiction, and that political institutions gain little of value from these tax bases.



Obviously hegemony is disputed between those who control gambling and make money out of it, those who are abused by it, and those who seek to get rid of it or take over control. In a strong sense, there are two cultures that exist alongside each other and largely avoid each other in everyday life: one that lives for the control of fate through gambling and luck or through organizing these games for others, and the other that believes in the rational control of circumstances and in the work ethic. Both play different games and fight against each other's definitions of play, but—surprisingly enough—both advocacies find the games they pursue to be an exercise in optimism.

Given the generally negative public attitude toward games of chance and gambling, there are few treatises on the normal definitions for such games, though there is a host of theories on addiction. Game players and gamblers usually talk of the excitement of the games, of their fantasies of winning, or of getting out of the house and having the good company and conversation of the other players. Some lottery players say that, despite the fact that they know they will lose, they so enjoy the fantasy of winning, and dreaming of what they will do with their winnings, that it is well worth the price of the lottery ticket. One such gambler said that he had gotten more imaginative satisfaction out of his lottery tickets over the years than out of anything else in his life. Though he still hasn't ever had a winning ticket, he doesn't care. It is always the case that he might get one, and in the meantime he can continue to dream of purchasing boats and traveling the world. Some players speak also of the excitement generated by the settings of casinos and racetracks, both of which give the game situations a carnival atmosphere. A modern Las Vegas or Atlantic City casino is redolent with implied reward value. The mirrors, the thousands of busy players, the restaurants, the lights, the hostesses—all imply that one is in a zone of high excitement, not unlike being at a state fair, a carnival parade, or in a New Year's Eve crowd. In general, current data suggest that mild gambling and gaming are healthy recreative activities for the masses who pursue them (Halliday and Fuller, 1974).

There is an enormous body of psychoanalytic writing about gambling as a reflection of internal conflict of various kinds, with the theorists differing in whether they focus on sex, anality, masochism,

and so on as the key terms for their analysis. In all of the theories the player is presumably driven to gambling activities by such internal conflict. In one example, attention is focused on inconsistently rewarding and punishing parents to explain gamblers' continued faith or lack of faith in their own gambling prospects. As Bergler puts it, games of chance are for losers, who know they are losers, and thus in a sense they have both the excitement of possibly winning and, more important, a way of gaining mastery over losing. Gamblers play in an attempt to be in control of their own losing. They are *psychic masochists*, says Bergler (1957). Unfortunately these theories cover the compulsive gamblers but none of the other categories of chance player mentioned above. A more rationalist theory of intrinsic motivation is the view that gambling is one of the few ways of risking something of personal value without the severely negative consequences that occur when you take real risks physically, emotionally, or socially. This is what makes it a play form, it is said, the fact that one can indeed take risks without disastrous consequences (Jones, 1973).

There are multiple opinions about the values of chance and gambling for society (Halliday and Fuller, 1974). There is the sociological rhetoric that gambling exists almost universally as a way for societies to give promise to those who are its failures. From potlatch to games of chance, it is said, there has to be some way in which fate can overturn the rich and lift the poor. In North American Indian potlatch ceremonies, often the wealthiest member of the tribe gave his possessions away, thus attaining the highest spiritual prestige. In modern games of chance, the reversals of fortune are less certain, but this is said to be the rationale behind the irrationality of the game. That is, that there is an egalitarian value to games of chance, because personal attributes count for nothing, and without these opportunities the poor might be more given to rebellion.

There is also the more cognitive psychological rhetoric that games of chance are models of the stock market and are a recreative form of the same values found in that vital economic activity. Games give clarity to these motives and activities in a way in which the confusion of everyday life cannot (Caillois, 1961). Thus much of human success requires making decisions in the face of uncertainty and having the courage to do so. Gambling, in these terms, is a model of courage



and optimism. While it is not in itself typically a form of success, it is nevertheless a model of the belief that life should involve risk taking. At the same time, the progress-oriented opponents of these games would argue that they are only a perversion of play, that the games are controlled by external rewards that are real, and because these dominate the games, they are not a form of play. But, as noted, that criticism requires that play must be always only intrinsically rewarding, and this clearly need not be the case.

There is a metaphysical rhetoric that chance has religious not economic origins. What began as trial by ordeal, such as walking on hot coals to prove oneself innocent or drawing lots or other forms of testing, is said to be displaced into games of chance. According to this rhetoric, gambling is the poor man's religion; it is secularized divination. The virtue of this argument, if it has merit, is that it might help to explain the widespread hold that gaming has throughout the world. It is hard for modern civilization to accept that, even in today's world, chance games gain more attention (in monetary terms) than any other forms of play. This suggests that games of chance and gambling are so widespread because they are basically a kind of religious effort to deal with fate, a kind of existential optimism.

Returning momentarily to the nature of the progress rhetoric, and speaking quite speculatively, perhaps the paradox in which children are said to play and adults not to play has something to do with the contrast between the progress rhetoric and the rhetoric of fate. It could be argued, for example, that the emergence of childhood and the ideological desire for children to progress and to guarantee the future is more of a mythological hope than a product of reason. That is, the fate of children has behind it the kind of attitude of hopefulness that once was admitted only of religion. In their way, it might be said, children guarantee the future beyond our own mortality, just as do the gods. We pray to the gods and we school the children, different agencies for a common attempt to reckon with our own mortality. If there is any truth to this speculation, it might explain why we so restrict children's behavior and only favor it if it guarantees their own progressive development. They are not supposed to play for immortal solace, as we do, they are supposed, like Alice in Wonderland, to conduct their divinely sexless, affectless, rational pursuit of development through play. If there is any sense to this speculation, then the

rhetoric of progress would be just a special case of the rhetorics of fate, and the progress of children would be another name for the way we use childhood as a lottery, to guarantee ourselves a brief immortality through their continuance.

The massive amounts of money spent on games of chance make them arguably the most important form of play in the modern world. They provide an underpinning of mass irrationality within our otherwise rationally structured urban societies. And yet, unlike all other forms of play, games of chance can perhaps be taken to give a fairer metaphysical representation of the actual chaos of both nature and humanity. Rhetorics of chance, or fate, speak more broadly to our immortal apprehensions, just as the progress rhetoric speaks more narrowly to our mortal aspirations. More important, games of chance show that it is possible for play to be largely passive, not involving much activity even when players take risks. They are also largely controlled by external rewards and involve an intermixture of the unreal (dice, roulette wheels, cards) and the real (money). The games are not only for the games' sake, they have external consequences; they are for money. Play and life interpenetrate here more completely than with any other games, and so these games deny the other definitions of play to be found in the majority of modern texts on the subject, where the player is supposed to be unconcerned with matters outside of the game, concerned only with means, not ends; where the play is supposed to be dominated by the player, who is active in decision making, and where there is freedom from externally imposed rules. Games of chance negate the supposed universality of that ever present, very modern philosophy of ludic voluntarism.

Finally, games of chance make it clearer than does the progress rhetoric that ambiguity lies in the character of play as well as in the advocacies of rhetoric. If play is top down or bottom up (Handelman), transformationally labile (Schechner), illusion (Erikson), virtual (Turkle), and dreamlike (Singer), and if the brain is at play as a neural fabulator (Sacks and Edelman), then the sources of ambiguity are manifold. All of these baffling possibilities suggest why there is an enmity between this and the prior rhetoric of progressive rationality. One might say that the rhetorics of progress and of fate are rivals for the human soul.