

Self and Pretence: Playing with Identity

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ABSTRACT: This paper considers the importance of play as a conventional space for hypothetical self-expression and self-trial, its importance for determination of identity, and for development of self-possibilities. Expanding such possibilities in play enables challenging of socially entrenched assumptions concerning possible and appropriate identities. Discussion is extended to the contexts of gender performance (drag) and sport-play. It is argued that play proceeds on the basis of a fundamental pretence of reality that must be taken seriously by its participants; this discussion includes considerations of serious and ironical play, “playing-at”, and travesty.

In this paper, I consider the importance of, and certain limitations on, play in the construction and expression of the human self.¹ I argue that play constitutes a privileged zone of expression within which the one playing can adopt, adapt, and reject provisional self-variations and hypothetical identities including those that are not otherwise considered acceptable and that such trials of self and identity are generally valuable for the individual who thus hypothesises herself. In the case of contra-conventional identities, there may also be a beneficial challenging of the social set of behaviour and identity norms that can foster in turn the exploration of self possibility. The circumstance that play occurs, by and large, within a social context of meaning and of the regulation and normalisation of behaviour and self-presentation, puts constraints on the intelligibility as well as the acceptability of play manifestations. These constraints can be more or less enabling, more or less inhibiting. Play is not an unmitigated good; it can be used to reinforce rigid systems of conformity and to suppress nonstandard identities. I have argued elsewhere² that systems for the regulation of play that render its participants mere loci of fully rationalised performance parameters are destructive of play as a spontaneous self-expression. Here, however, I shall concentrate on two main issues, which are properly prior considerations to the preceding, namely: (1) how play figures in self and identity formation and expression and how this can be inhibited, and (2) the value of play in questioning and even subverting our (largely ontological) assumptions concerning appropriate

¹The “human” here is not redundant; I emphasise the term deliberately in order to underline the specifically embodied circumstance of the self. I take human existence to be fundamentally embodied; if we did not have bodies and, moreover, ones with differing configurations and abilities, none of the discussion to follow would have any relevance to our existence.

²“Play, Performance, and the Docile Athlete”, *Sport, Ethics and Philosophy*, 1, No. 1 (April, 2007): 47-57.

play. I shall argue for a conception of play as meaning rather than movement and will consider the role of convention in conditioning and interpreting play.

I begin with an abbreviated review of some of the recent literature on the concept of the narrative self in order to clarify in advance a number of conceptual elements relied upon in subsequent sections. David Velleman's defence of "narrative intelligence" against Dennett's refutation of the notion of a "central controller" is introduced both in order to clear some ground around what I take the self to be and because Velleman's analysis directs attention to a critical turn in the discussion to follow, namely, the characterisation of the self-narrator as improviser. This characterisation suggests the hypothetically creative stance that takes on particular importance in the engagement in play (and, later, gender performance), offering an opening for the self to explore its own possibilities. There are limits to this creativity and thus I discuss Marya Schechtman's analysis of the factors that constrain self-narrative, such as meaning-context and the demand for coherence, elements that will also have a place in later discussion. Against this philosophical background I consider certain aspects of the nature of play, especially sport-play, as a realm of hypothetical self-expression and the central role of pretence in such play.

In the latter part of the paper, I draw a connection between the self possibilities presented by play and pretence and the constricting of self possibility effected by conventional gender interpretation. Making extensive reference to the work of Judith Butler, I also consider the further possibilities for both the subversion of those restrictions through play and the expansion of self possibility that might ensue as a consequence.

The connection between earlier and later discussions lies, of course, in the concept of play, but also in the rejection of conventional assumptions concerning the reality of a natural self in favour of an understanding of selves as both narratively constructed and, to an extent, dynamically creative, both of themselves and of the context within which they can be understood, especially *as* selves. Identity, then, can in turn be understood as a product of the combined effects of self-narration and of play. Indeed, these two run a parallel course of hypothetical creativity: play infuses self-narration, and thus identity, with *possibility*.

A Short Story About Selves and Identities

Recent philosophical theorising about the self has advocated a view of selfhood as either illusory or as the product of various kinds of construction, whether social (principally the effect of various systems of power and knowledge-production, as in Foucault) or narrative—a philosophical thread that has as its contributors theorists such as Paul Ricoeur, Herbert Fingarette, David Velleman, and Marya Schechtman.³ The narrative move in philosophical accounts of the self has been well argued by others and I shall not present a defence of it here, but instead offer some additional considerations that presuppose such a view as their background. In particular, whereas accounts of the self in terms of narrative are commonly concerned at some point by the problem of narrative veridicality, I wish to explore the potential of self-narrative for play and pretence and the way in which such pretence can enhance the

³Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); Herbert Fingarette, *Self-Deception* (New York: Humanities Press, 1969); J. David Velleman, *Self to Self: Selected Essays* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Marya Schechtman, *The Constitution of Selves* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1996).

process of settling one's identity. I shall argue that identity, far from being something that one discovers, is clarified through both a reflective and practical process that can easily take on a trial and error aspect. Thus play and pretence are ways of both expressing and developing one's identity.

The "identity" supposed here is the kind of identity described by Schechtman as concerned with "the set of characteristics each person has that make her the person she is",⁴ rather than the kind of reidentification issue that has constituted the larger portion of the philosophical literature on identity. It is the identity not of: "am I the same person who attended Cedar Park School", but of one who asks "who am I?" or of whom it is asked "what has happened to you?" or "how did you turn into someone who would do those things?"

How do we know who we are, and is there indeed any one to be known? Insofar as we talk about self-identity, i.e., the identity of a self, we seem to be asserting the existence of something that *is* a self. Some, like Daniel Dennett, would argue that selves are merely fictional characters produced by the brain but with no further reality than that possessed by such fictional characters.⁵ It is not the case that there is a 'me' or 'self' that ponders these questions and that is the author of that internal voice-over that narrates my personal dramas. There is only a brain that possesses a number of modules processing various kinds of information in a mutually influencing but otherwise essentially independent way. Simply, there is no 'me'.

David Velleman takes issue with this characterisation of the central narrating consciousness as fiction through a long and complex line of reasoning that I will not reproduce here. He does, however, ask why the putative self should be compared to a (third person) fictional character rather than "the author of a veridical autobiography, who really is identical with the protagonist of his story?"⁶ While I do not here propose to defend Dennett's position, there are a few comments that suggest themselves in this connection and that may offer some preliminary clarification of some aspects of the narrative account of the self that I shall be presupposing in the rest of the paper.

Velleman's question raises what is, for my purposes, a crucial issue, though he answers it somewhat differently than I would. This is *not* about the real existence of the central narrator, in one sense of how that designation may be understood. That is, the problem is posed in terms of whether there is a real *me* doing the self-conscious work of writing my own story, or is this 'me', the narrator, simply the product of the story-telling? Our choice seems to be between (a) a narration and no narrator, and (b) a narrator and a narration that is distinct (in some important way) from the narrator. I want to reject both these alternatives, but for different reasons.

First of all, even the central, first person, character of a truthful autobiography is a *presentation* of himself by the author and it is so on two levels: it is a presentation of himself to

⁴*The Constitution of Selves*, 74.

⁵Daniel C. Dennett, "The Reality of Selves", in *Consciousness Explained*, (London: Penguin Books, 1993), 412-430; "The Self as the Center of Narrative Gravity", in *Self and Consciousness: Multiple Perspectives*, Frank S. Kessel, Pamela M. Cole, and Dale L. Johnson, eds. (Hove and London: Lawrence Erlbaum and Associates, Inc., 1992), 103-115.

⁶"The Self as Narrator", in *Self to Self*, 207.

his audience, who get an edited version of him, one that includes only those parts of himself he chooses to impart to others. This narrative construction of himself, moreover, is itself parasitic on the narrative presentation of his life and activities that he tells himself (i.e., *as himself*). My point here is simply that this self-story is constructed at a fundamental level, and thus in this sense we can agree that the narrator, where this is conceived as a character within the narration, does not exist separate from the production.

The 'me', then, would never be identical with my central narrator, because such a figure or character is just that—a fictive construction, the 'self' I contrive to show the world, or only to myself. The question then is whether there is any 'me' beyond this or only a working brain. In my view, we have to say there is, but only as the activity of consciousness, and therefore that the self-narrator is a construct of consciousness, attempting to make sense of itself: the self is this activity of making sense.⁷ I don't suppose that such selves are *separable* from brains, but it doesn't strike me as useful to identify one as the other. I assume that self-narrative requires a brain capable of conscious reflexivity; beyond that, my concerns here have to do with human experience as humans experience it.

The *self*, then, as I understand it and as I shall suppose in the following, is the *activity* of reflection, of choice, and of the coordination and integration of experience. This is an activity rooted in embodied existence. Simply, the self is an activity of consciousness that is located in a specific, temporally contingent, and socially interpreted body. The self is not made, nor makes itself, out of nothing; most of the material of its own self-story is not of its choosing, nor is its origin. What we are is a story that begins with what our bodies and those who have nurtured us have brought into being. Our existence is, at the start, not chosen, but happens to us. We could (try to) continue to let it happen to us, but this is an illusory evasion: from the point of self-consciousness we are stuck with making the choices that make our selves. The self-reflection that we from then on engage in or avoid is reflection on what choices we have made or not made, what we think we have done and want to do now and in the future. "Who we are" is nothing other than this activity of reflection and choice combined with the physical circumstances of our bodily and social existence, which includes a continuing accumulation of act and experience. What does the self-reflecting is a specific embodied consciousness; what that "self"-reflection produces is in the first instance a self and in the second a story about it, i.e., about that specific embodied consciousness and its activity.

An *identity* is produced by self-activity. In Marya Schechtman's terms, individuals constitute themselves as persons by coming to think of themselves as persisting subjects who have had experience in the past and will continue to have experience in the future, taking certain experiences as theirs. Some, but not all, individuals weave stories of their lives, and it is their doing so which makes them persons. On this view, a person's *identity* (in the sense at issue in the characterisation question) is constituted by the content of her self-narrative, and the traits, actions, and experiences included in it are, by virtue of that inclusion, hers.⁸

As she points out, however, if simply having *any* narrative self-conception was sufficient to

⁷Velleman ends up saying something quite like this ("The Self as Narrator", 220-223).

⁸*The Constitution of Selves*, 94.

produce an identity it would follow that no person could be wrong about themselves. This is clearly false and so there are certain conditions (“constraints”) that must be met by any candidate identity-constituting narrative. As she also points out, an identity is not something one has whether one knows it or not, but *because* of one’s conscious appropriation of one’s experiences and actions as one’s own.⁹ Identity, then, is a self-directed *action*.

One of the constitutive elements that Schechtman stresses in the process of identity construction is its contextuality. In her analysis of the constraints on narrative production, she points out that one needs to constitute one’s identity in a way that recognises and to some extent accommodates the language of selfhood (or personhood) that surrounds one. This could mean a number of things, from cultural views on what persons are to others’ views on what you are. As she puts it, “to be identity-defining an individual’s self-narrative must conform in certain crucial respects to the narrative others tell of his life”.¹⁰ Thus, there has to be a degree of social fit as well as an inwardly directed and acknowledged activity.

But, of course, context is not only a matter of social or cultural positioning or translation. To understand one’s own affects or actions, or someone else’s, calls for a contextually sensitive interpretation: to understand what A’s actions signify, one has to understand what makes A “tick”. Taking actions or expressions out of their subject’s context, i.e., identity-constituting narrative, or examining them removed from it, will fail to understand them. But the flip side of this is that a narrative that itself does not provide adequate connections renders its subject unintelligible.¹¹

An important observation Schechtman makes here, and that brings this discussion back to the earlier question about the possible identity between narrator and narration is this:

The sense of one’s life as unfolding according to the logic of a narrative is not just an *idea* we have, it is an organising principle of our lives. It is the lens through which we filter our experience and plan for actions, not a way we think about ourselves in reflective hours. How we appropriate actions and experiences to make them part of our consciousness is much more like how we appropriate elements of food to make them parts of our bodies than how we appropriate books to make them part of our library.¹²

Velleman makes a similar point in suggesting that a person’s “central controller” is a fiction, not in the sense of being a fictional character in one’s autobiography, but that it *is* that

⁹*The Constitution of Selves*, 94.

¹⁰*The Constitution of Selves*, 95.

¹¹Cf. Fingarette’s discussion of bad cover stories, i.e., accounts of self that develop gaps and inconsistencies, ultimately breaking down altogether (*Self-Deception*, Chapter 3). Also Velleman, 212: I act in accord with who I think I am—my self-representation, and if you want to understand my behaviour, understanding *who I think I am* will go a long way to doing so. But, of course, I may be wrong about who I think I am, and so my behaviour might seem very odd to others.

¹²*The Constitution of Selves*, 113.

autobiography, “the reflexive representation that feeds back into the person’s behaviour”.¹³ Simply, our self-story will be considerably more coherent if we play it out. That is, if we take ourselves to be a certain way, to have certain emotions or motivations, and those characteristics constitute good reasons for acting a certain way, then so acting will maintain the relative coherence of our self-stories. Simply again, consistent motivation-behaviour connections make for consistent self-stories. As Velleman goes on to describe him, “the self-narrator is an ingenuous improviser, inventing a role that expresses his actual motives in response to real events. He can improvise his actual role in these events because his motives take shape and produce behaviour under the influence of his self-descriptions, which are therefore underdetermined by antecedent facts, so that he partly invents what he enacts”.¹⁴

What Velleman is describing here is what he refers to as “narrative intelligence”, which he contends Dennett is, in the end, committed to admitting as a human being’s central controller, in place of the “brain pearl” he rejects.¹⁵ My interest in this characterisation is the creative and pretensive elements that it suggests are involved in a person’s construction of their identity-constituting self-narrative. In the rest of this paper, I shall explore elements of this process that tend to be overlooked. That is, discussions of identity-narrative focus primarily on whether or not it can be veridical or on whether there is some distinct agent of narrative production, as we have seen. What I want to argue in the following pages is that *hypothetical* identities, and the narratives that underpin them, that is, ones that are consciously taken on as explicitly counterfactual or at least ambiguously true or false, can be highly valuable in the determination of self-narratives that are more accurate,¹⁶ intelligible, and coherent than might otherwise be the case. Pretending to have an alternate identity to that which one takes to be one’s own, I contend, extends, challenges, and might even reveal, one’s self in the direction of expanded possibility.

Play, meaning, and pretence

In the following I shall frame a good part of the discussion of play in terms of sport-play, but I take the implications of this discussion to range far wider than the special concerns of the philosophy of sport. It so happens that sport-play manifests in an unusually rich measure the ambiguities that attach to play in general, specifically with respect to its productive grounding in the mutual provocation of structure and improvisation, as well as its social normalising function. Similar cases could be made for other forms of play, most notably music and theatre, and I will apply this discussion eventually to the play and performance of gender.

¹³“The Self as Narrator”, 214.

¹⁴“The Self as Narrator”, 221.

¹⁵“The Self as Narrator”, 222.

¹⁶By “accurate” I mean something like Schechtman’s “reality constraint”, but I am also supposing that certain kinds of play expose one to situations requiring responses which, while in their own way artificial, can be useful filters for the development of one’s self-conception as coherent and more thoroughly intelligible.

I remarked at the outset that play constitutes a privileged zone of expression;¹⁷ that claim must be clarified somewhat. Many kinds of play possess the characteristic of being social conventions that countenance violations, often substantial ones, of social conventions. This is not a new observation. It is a commonplace that any given sport, for example, may allow, even prescribe, behaviour that would be not just unacceptable but illegal outside the sport context. It may seem that sport is, in this respect, a somewhat more heightened play situation than theatre or cinema, given that the latter engage in the show or pretence of such actions, while sportspersons play “for real”. It would seem then that sport and theatre pretend at different points or about different things. This may not be the case in truth, however. Both sport and theatre begin from a fundamental presupposition that is essential for play to proceed *seriously*; namely, that the play is real. Moreover, if David Z. Saltz’s persuasive analysis of theatrical pretence¹⁸ is successful, then one of the most obvious apparent differences between the two forms of play falls away. That is, one might think that although the reality of the play context is only provisional, the actions carried out by the players are not in the case of sport (since there “really is” running, hitting, and the trying to win a “real” game), but otherwise in theatrical play, where these things are merely represented. On the contrary, for Saltz, sport-play and theatrical-play would have to have the same ontological character since, once one commits to playing one’s part in the play, one commits to carrying out those acts that are *really* appropriate to dramatic play.

Play is a privileged zone of expression both because of its structure of normative exception *and* because of its fundamental pose of pretence: “let’s play” does not only enjoin one to do things not otherwise allowed, but to pretend that the play-world thus conjured is real, that its rules and conventions are those of the world in which one lives, that its perhaps fantastic possibilities are genuine possibilities for its participants, with all the play-stipulated consequences and rewards. To engage in play of this sort is for the participant to also, in many instances, be enabled to take on roles that would not otherwise be open to her. In play, one can be someone or something else. One can play with alternate identities.

Play is not simply the movement here and there of physical objects through space, as important as that or some other movement might be to any given form of play. Play is also a “movement” of self, a trial or trying out of selves. The permission to violate other conventions and to try on alternate self-expressions that is given to its participants by a game or other kind of play opens the possibility to them to extend the basic pretence of the play context in a nonsuperficial way to their own selves, as a means of exploration of their own attitudes, motivations, and behaviours, and of their own assumptions about these. The traditional claim of sport as character-building no doubt had more to do with the test of one’s resolve in resisting pain and rising to a challenge. But sport also, insofar as it presents these hypothetical play-situations, offers an arena within which one can play out situational responses and find out who one “is”—that is, gather one’s character by venturing oneself in the possibilities. Thus, suppose that a given play situation constructs an antagonistic stance between participants; the player

¹⁷One should perhaps say “*relatively* privileged” as it is rarely the case that “anything goes”.

¹⁸David Z. Saltz, “How to Do Things on Stage”, *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 49, No. 1 (Winter, 1991): . See discussion below, p. 14.

can take on that antagonism as if it is truly hers (“I have to thrash the opposing player, goalie, etc.”) even when it is not (“that’s my best friend opposite me”), abandoning it once it has been explored. An advantage of sport-play in this context is precisely its provisional quality, making it a “safe” (in one sense) environment for the individual to discover that she enjoys/ fears/ detests confrontation/ selfishness/ cooperativeness in others, enjoys/ fears/ detests being forceful, etc. in ways not otherwise open to her. She experiences what it is like to play at being *X* and find that it enthralls or appalls. Admittedly, this trial is hypothetical, and thus what one discovers (if one does) is what it is like to *play at* being *X*; one does not become *X*—necessarily. There may be a point at which play becomes reality for the participant, particularly in sport contexts, where for reasons yet to be explored these lines tend to blur, but the move from play to commitment is just that on the part of the participant, and the next step in self-construction, one for which there is an implicit narrative explanation. At this point, the individual can (in principle) fill in the blanks to explain their behaviour in terms not of “I was just playing, I wasn’t serious, it wasn’t *me*”, but “*I did x, because of y*”.

In the preceding, the hypothetical or provisional aspect of play has been characterised as something in which one *might* engage. One need not, after all, play (or watch, insofar as audience can be legitimately described as a participation in the pretensive world of play). There is, however, a sense in which this is not an option. Insofar as one plays, one *must* suspend reality, and thus engage in the pretence that is the condition of play. This should not be read to mean that one cannot *in fact* play without doing so but that the convention of play enjoins upon its participants the taking seriously of the presumption that one will do so. The requirement is normative, not constitutive. One can play in ways that defy this convention in various ways, as I shall presently show. Such cases aside, to play a game is to pretend that its rules and structure define one’s world. For 60 or 90 minutes one pretends that this world of play is the real one and suspend the rules and cares of the other larger world outside. The player gets to “be” someone else, with other privileges and responsibilities, someone who “lives or dies” with the bounce of a ball, someone whose cares and comportment may be quite other than they are when the game ends.¹⁹ In playing a game one is conventionally required to pretend that it really matters, as if it is *real* and its claims on us valid and decisive. Not to do so is to fail to play *seriously* but to only *play at* play.

One can also *play a role* where this appears to have no pretensive quality. I do not intend here to attempt to encompass every sense of “play” nor of “playing a role”. Certainly there are many such performances that lie outside the present analysis. It may be well worth considering just how far pretence in fact extends into the world of ordinary social performatives given the circumstance that formulaic expressions are commonly carried out with the understanding that they are *to be taken as* indicating a meaning other than their literal shape, but that will not be pursued here. One notable distinction between such role performance and that involved in *mere* play, however, is that the latter is self-consciously pretensive, the outcome of a deliberate act of pretending for the purpose of play. Game and play theorists like to think of games and play as

¹⁹This provisional-world quality is clearest perhaps for casual amateurs, but even professional players do not, in fact, cease to be when the game-killing blow is struck; they, too, go home to whatever semblance of ordinary life they enjoy.

autotelic.²⁰ That claim may be arguable, but it does point to a significant distinction, namely, the self-referential quality of play.²¹

The pretence that is involved in sport-play operates at two levels: 1) the pretence that the world of the game or activity is the “real” one, rather than an artificially bounded and structured contrivance and 2) that the participant’s *expressions* of self within that conventional world are themselves real, genuine rather than pretend. One must pretend that one is not pretending.

The terms “pretence” and “pretend” suggest an element of deceit or fakery but these are not necessarily characteristic of what occurs here so long as one acknowledges the conventional force of the initial level of pretence, though this is not to deny that such conventions may also countenance or prescribe conventional forms of deceit (bluffing, for example). If the participants suspend the first level of pretence they risk losing the conventionally circumscribed space for “safe” experimentation by forgoing the suspension or diminution of real-world responsibility for the meaning of one’s actions.

David Z. Saltz makes similar observations with respect to theatre in arguing, contra Searle, that actors do not simply *pretend* to do actions on stage, but really do actions that *count as* those actions within the conventions of performance.²² The performance-context in this case is the performance of a dramatic artifice, a convention the participation in which, like a game, requires certain behaviours, including appropriate actions and responses between participants, appropriate not for “real-life” but for the successful performance of the theatrical piece. Notably, the responsibility of the actors in such an instance is to carry out the correct performance conventions when prompted by the performance to do so, and this may entail actions that would be highly inappropriate outside the play-context.²³ This requires of the actors, not imitation of real actions happening elsewhere, but commitment to really carrying out performance-convention defined action. What the performer does is not pretend to express sadness by uttering the words of some sad person in the manner that other person might do, but deliver the appropriate and anticipated response to the other performers likewise committed to this project of theatrical production. Similarly, in the sport-play context, if a football player strikes a shot to the net, it is appropriate for the goalkeeper to make a serious effort to prevent it entering the net rather than pretend to be a goalkeeper and merely act as-if playing at goalkeeping (perhaps by making an exaggerated but irrelevantly timed dive after the ball has crossed the line). The latter stance would amount to playing-at playing.

Playing-at play

²⁰See especially Bernard Suits, *The Grasshopper: Games, Life, and Utopia* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1978).

²¹It is also the case that games and other play come to quite clear ends, upon which the participants leave the field of play. Other roles are somewhat less alienable in this respect; being a parent, for example.

²²Saltz, *op. cit.* 42.

²³Saltz, *op. cit.* 33, 35.

Ironical play, that is, play that only plays-at playing, violates the fundamental pretence of play. If we have to take the play-world seriously even though we know it is only play, one who directly challenges this pretence by only pretending to play (to pretend) shatters the conventional illusion that is vital to serious play. There are a number of ways this can be done. Because play is manifested in physical movement, we tend to concentrate on these constitutive actions. However, what makes the actions of play specifically those of play is their meaning. This meaning is intersubjectively mediated. Even where the motivation, purpose, or method of play is idiosyncratic, and all the more obviously where it is communal, how play as such or any given action in play is interpreted, whether by the individual player or by others who observe, rests upon a background (or foreground) of interpretation. As Schechtman points out, in order for a self-narrative to be identity-defining it has to not only meet a number of internal criteria, but external ones as well—it has to link up with a social background, the set of concepts employed by the culture within which one operates and which provides the language and means of self-interpretation.²⁴

The most straightforward application of these points to sport-play would be the way in which linguistic expression and value assessments become relativised, not only to sport as such, but to particular sport subcultures. A given physical action, e.g., striking an opponent, may be assessed as indicating, depending on the meaning-context, courage, losing the plot, or an incomprehensible violation of sportsmanship norms. But even more than this, it is important to see that a play action *is* a play action, and a play action of a particular sort, not because that action has a particular physical shape, but because it has a particular *meaning* relative to a socially-situated lexicon of play meanings and methods of interpretation. Thus, to take on the character of a player requires a context of recognised *play*, along with the structure that regulates play as such rather than non-play.

Playing-at can then be understood as a contravention of the play-convention itself; it is a refusal to play the game of playing the game. The repetition in the characterisation is critical, as playing-at is doubly-reflected play. It is an ironical stance with respect to play that has the effect of drawing explicit attention to the hypothetical or ironical structure of play itself. The player who plays-at the game fails to take seriously that game and its conventional world of behaviour and meaning norms. The annoyance that playing-at provokes in serious players issues from this implicit negation of a world that they are prepared to treat (at least) *as if* real and thus ridicules their temporary or essentialist commitment to it. But, most importantly, playing-at violates the most fundamental pretence of play itself: the player is expected to “play it like you mean it”, i.e., participate in the game not just as a series of possible actions, but pretend it really matters even if or while he or she knows it doesn't.²⁵ Thus, it's playing at play, rather than playing.

Another way in which one can throw the conventional character of ordinary performance into relief is through travesty. Travesty is a form of ironical play that comments on

²⁴See *The Constitution of Selves*, 95.

²⁵Hence the injunction: “Quit messing about and *play*”. And the particular bite of parody and, especially, satire, both of which also show up the conventional and nonessential character of behaviour that is taken perhaps all too seriously. The difference here, though, is that satire is ordinarily itself a serious activity.

the fact of performance just as we are drawn into its drama, forgetting its unreal character. Like the actor who startles us out of the story we have become absorbed in by speaking directly to the audience or camera, or the professional athlete who comments on our spectatorship by pulling a pen out of a sock to sign an autograph in the middle of the game, travesty's alteration of perspective forces a shift in the observer's assumptions about how the game is played by not playing it "seriously".²⁶ Travesty, especially as drag, thus functions as the deliberate deconstruction of conventional performance, and especially of a kind of performance that is not generally recognised as such.

However, a couple of things must be borne in mind here. Overtly, travesty in the form of drag plays with the norms of gender presentation themselves.²⁷ This is not, however, where its more profound significance lies as it does not fundamentally challenge the validity or internal structure of the standard norms as such, so much as emphasise them and thus, arguably, reinforces those norms in certain respects. Rather, as Judith Butler has pointed out, it is the ontological presuppositions of gender performance that are called into question and possibly undermined. "[D]rag is subversive to the extent that it reflects on the imitative structure by which hegemonic gender is itself produced and disputes heterosexuality's claim on naturalness and originality".²⁸ And again, "what drag can point out is that (1) this set of ontological presuppositions is at work, and (2) that it is open to rearticulation".²⁹ Travesty, whether in the form of drag or in the form of sport gender-crossing that I shall shortly consider, is a form of play that, on the surface, reiterates all the familiar rules of play and yet subverts them by calling attention to their contestable and arbitrary qualities. It is subversive play that works precisely because it rehearses and reconstructs the prevailing role-structure, though it does so in a way that demonstrates its non-essentiality. Travesty of this kind is effective as critique precisely because it does not dispute the validity of the rules themselves. What is deconstructed is the

²⁶An additional layer of irony here comes from the circumstance that the actor's aside is scripted, the athlete's self-aggrandising flourish is inherent in the game-spectacle, and the deconstruction of travesty in the form of drag requires the persistence of the conventions deconstructed to be understood.

²⁷By "drag" I mean the studied affectation of stereotypical or exaggerated "masculinity" or "femininity" by (usually) opposite sex performers. I say nothing here of gender illusionists who play with gender signification so as to deliberately present a confusing outward identity.

²⁸Butler, *Bodies That Matter* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 125.

²⁹Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 214. See also *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 138, and "Imitation and Gender Insubordination", in *Women, Knowledge, and Reality*, eds. Ann Garry and Marilyn Pearsall (New York: Routledge, 1996): 371-387. Judith Halberstam, in *Female Masculinity* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1998), 234-240, adds an important addendum to this by pointing out the extent to which masculinity is seen as natural and normative femininity as artificial performance. That is, we are used to the idea that feminine gender performance is just that, but masculinity is presumed to be fundamentally nonperformative and *real*, save in those few cases where it smacks of overcompensation (note the *over*) and thus appears false.

prevailing assumptions about which rules apply to whom; in effect, *who* can play which game or which role. In doing so, it reasserts self-possibility to exist at a point that has been assumed nonexistent.

We can understand this situation in terms of a Habermasian lifeworld and its communicative matrix, wherein speech and mutual understanding presuppose an interpretative context upon which speakers and hearers draw in order to achieve consensus in meaning.³⁰ Judith Butler's characterisation of this situation bears considerable similarities, but is cast in terms and directed to problems that are closer to those of the present paper. In her more recent work, in particular, Butler emphasises the extent to which the self and identity are produced within the tension between agency and normative constraint. Thus, we are made by and dependent on social norms, but we are not therefore simply the effect of them, but have a critical and transformative relation to them.³¹ Nevertheless, because the means of interpretation and communication depend upon social norms, self-understanding and communication of self-giving an account of oneself—depends upon the existence of norms and is provoked by them. But accepting that norms are the ineluctable background to one's subjectivity does not entail complacency concerning their content: some norms permit human flourishing and others are destructive of it, particularly insofar as they rule out or constrict certain identities. Unless the norms give countenance to a particular expression of subjectivity, i.e., unless it can be expressed within the terms of the prevailing norms, one cannot make oneself understood. Recognition by (within) social norms is the crucial first step in social identity; without this one cannot exist.

How we might read this in relation to our present concerns is as claiming, first of all, that I can only imagine my possibilities because my society has; something is a real possibility for me only if it is a social possibility. But this must be understood carefully, as what exactly it means for something to be a real or social possibility rests upon the preceding discussion of norms. A hasty reading might suggest that Butler's claim is that unreal possibilities, that is, socially unrecognisable ones, are unavailable to individuals, but this, of course, conflicts with the claim that some individuals suffer erasure as unreal. The "reality" at stake here is of an ontological character, but it is a contingent one of reward and oblivion. That is to say, the "real" here refers primarily to the comprehensible (using "comprehend" in the wide sense of inclusion as well as the understandable) and, by extension, the practicable. Thus, if a possibility is not recognised as a real possibility in relation to prevailing social norms, if it cannot be comprehended by them, then it cannot socially exist for me, and if I take it on nonetheless I am incomprehensible, i.e., unreal in this sense.

This analysis can be applied to play. In play, one tries on roles that are both possible and sanctioned in a space where those roles and their trying on is likewise sanctioned, and play

³⁰Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, trans. Frederick G. Lawrence (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1987), 298. See also Habermas, *Communication and the Evolution of Society*, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1979), and *Postmetaphysical Thinking*, trans. William Mark Hohengarten (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1992).

³¹Butler, *Undoing Gender*, Introduction, 3. See also *Giving An Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), Chapter 1, where these issues are discussed in relation to the work of Adorno, of Nietzsche, and of Foucault.

allows one to explore these possibilities in a concrete yet hypothetical way. One way of looking at this situation is as an attempt to construct for oneself an answer to the question “who am I?” That is, one can enter into play with such a question in mind, or play can function as the context that presses such a question upon one, more or less unbidden, as when the play situation compels the otherwise complacent individual into a moment of self-doubt or confusion concerning his character, responses, or identity. Such a situation calls for the individual to account for himself.

Such a situation has its echo in Butler’s discussion of self-accounting as a response to an external query concerning oneself. In this view, self-narrative does not occur as a spontaneous activity, but is a response to certain kinds of demand that are directed to the subject. This claim is put forward in on several occasions in *Giving an Account of Oneself*. For example,

Nietzsche did well to understand that I begin my story of myself only in the face of such a ‘you’ who asks me to give an account. Only in the face of such a query or attribution from an another—‘was it you?’—do any of us start to narrate ourselves, or find that, for urgent reasons, we must become self-narrating beings.³²

Thus, I come into being as a reflective subject in the context of establishing a narrative account of myself when I am spoken to by someone and prompted to address myself to the one who addresses me.³³

And, in discussing the circumstance that in giving an account of oneself to another one must use terms that are intersubjectively comprehensible, that is, one’s account must cohere with norms governing what is and what is not recognisable as a self account, Butler explains that

No account takes place outside the structure of address, even if the addressee remains implicit and unnamed, anonymous and unspecified. The address establishes the account as an account, and so the account is completed only on the occasion when it is effectively exported and expropriated from the domain of what is my own. It is only in dispossession that I can and do give any account of myself.³⁴

Does play, or can play, stand in the place of such a questioner? Insofar as a questioner is a *person* who questions in a literal sense, the answer is clearly “no”. On the other hand, play can in many instances provide the *situation* within which one is questioned, whether this is manifested by the questioning that is put to one by another in that situation or, perhaps more often, by constructing a situation within which the subject queries herself. Play itself cannot take on the role of questioner, but it is a situation or context within which one is frequently called upon to examine oneself, to account for one’s behaviour, one’s character, one’s desires, or one’s identity. Butler claims that the call to give an account of oneself always issues from an external source, or its assumption. The case of play suggests that this claim is at least partially

³²*Giving an Account of Oneself*, *op. cit.* 11.

³³*Giving an Account of Oneself*, *op. cit.* 15.

³⁴*Giving an Account of Oneself*, *op. cit.* 36-7.

false. While we could admit that, in play, the occasion for questioning is externally excited, the questioning that it provokes need not issue from any other than the subject herself. Sometimes it will, indeed, be the result of a direct demand from other(s) that presents the playing subject with the crisis of self-explanation, but in other circumstances it may well be the player alone who must determine for herself her response to the situation. In that case, it is a question of “what do I think of what I am required to do here?” or “am I the sort of person who acts this way?” or “is this really me? do I fit in here?”³⁵

Just as it is social norms that create the space of play, it is the same mechanism that restricts entry to the field of play: play is a socially constituted space and not everyone can play in every way or place available, and sometimes these restrictions have little or nothing to do with the play itself. Fitness to play and appropriate style of play are often decided by conventions other than those that establish play as play. Thus, for some individuals, playing at some roles will be seen as impossible, ridiculous, or as constituting a travesty. It remains true that play allows greater than everyday licence to try on identities, but that is not to say that it is a realm of infinite possibility, either with respect to possible expression or with respect to access to play. Certain play roles or certain play forms are taken to be unimaginable for some individuals, by themselves or by others. These possibilities are, in Butler’s sense, unthinkable, and such play ridiculous or a travesty of the specific form of play.³⁶

As Butler points out, in reference to the restriction of gender performance, by the ruling out of one as false and the legitimation of another as real or authentic,³⁷ such normative responses hint at the ontological presuppositions at work behind these judgements. In the case of gender performance, it is an ontology of rigidly binary sexual and gender categories that is put into crisis by performance that does not fit those categories, such as drag and transgender, both of which, says Butler, make us “question what is real and what has to be,...by showing us how contemporary notions of reality can be questioned, and new modes of reality instituted. Fantasy is not simply a cognitive exercise, an internal film that we project inside the interior theater of the mind. Fantasy structures relationality, and it comes into play in the stylization of embodiment itself.”³⁸ These performances force us to question what is real; certain sport-play performances force us to question this as well, though what they most directly question is the nature and value of play by unsettling presuppositions about the fixity and reality of play norms.

³⁵Consider, for example, someone who discovers while on a solo climb that alpine pursuits are not (or are) her best forum for self-expression.

³⁶Thus, for example, the comment I have on occasion heard uttered that “women (chicks) don’t play hockey”. The claim is not that women don’t perform the actions definitive of that game, but that their doing so doesn’t amount to or count as “playing hockey”, or that it is not *really* hockey, and they cannot *really* be hockey players.

³⁷*Undoing Gender*, Ch. 10, 214.

³⁸*Undoing Gender*, Ch. 10, 217. See also p. 35: “This violence emerges from a profound desire to keep the order of binary gender natural or necessary, to make of it a structure, either natural or cultural, or both, that no human can oppose, and still remain human.”

It would be a mistake, then, to see this kind of playing with convention to be “mere” play, i.e., not serious in the sense of the player not caring about the refusal to be serious in the sense of conventionally conventional. At least in part this would be because of what is at stake for the player. As Butler observes, “Possibility is not a luxury”.³⁹ Saying that gender is performative “is not simply to insist on the right to produce a pleasurable and subversive spectacle but to allegorize the spectacular ways in which reality is both reproduced and contested;” it points to the ways in which normative performance, in this case of gender, is enforced through the denial, hostility, and violence that greets performance outside those boundaries.⁴⁰ Thus, what this kind of ironical play does in reasserting the pretensive quality of the roles it takes on in play, in arguing indirectly that gender normativity is assumption rather than nature, is to reassert the self’s possibilities to exist precisely where they have been deemed not to exist; that the self is already playing and could, at least in principle, play differently.

Seriously Pretending

While play *can* offer significant benefits for the development of self by virtue of allowing the trial and expression of alternate and provisional identities, and subversive play *can* work to broaden those possibilities by contributing to a weakening of naturalising assumptions about available or appropriate roles, there are significant and persistent obstacles to such free play. Some of those obstacles come from within the actual world of play. The first is bodily and is in the first instance relatively but deceptively simple: sports that require physical capacities that the individual does not have or cannot for whatever reason acquire will not be possibilities for her, or will be possible but unrewarding. An important caution must be expressed here: as suggested above, inhibitions that appear or are claimed to be bodily may not be, or not quite in the way advertised. Sex-differentiated play is often of this sort. It is sometimes argued that a given sport can be properly or safely played only by men, or that only women have the special qualities for some other. Such claims are frequently without sufficient justification in themselves and certainly inadequate ground to exclude participation. What such restrictions commonly respond to and reinforce is another source of inhibition: the drive to maintain certain patterns of social conformity, such as sex-based role assignments. But many sports also function as social intermediaries for those deeply involved in them in much the same way as workplaces or schools do, though in more specific and local ways than (or as well as) the general reinforcement of gender conformity and heteronormativity.

Identification with a sport or sport group (team) can be experienced by the participant as fulfilling, but it can also be narrowing so far as the tolerance of variation and alternate identifications is concerned. The reasons for this are undoubtedly complex and no answer can be given here that would not be overly simplistic. But one possible appeal of such identifications is also precisely what is potentially dangerous about them: by offering a ready-made identity they let their adherents off the autonomy hook—one need not go through the work of constituting one’s own unique identity if one can get one off the same rack as one’s team jersey. Moreover, bad faith lurks close by: “I am an x; I have to do y”. Of course, group identities by no means must or always lead to heteronomous or irresponsible actions, nor can

³⁹Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 29.

⁴⁰Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 30.

one do without at least some group identifications in forming one's own self-understanding. One's identity must, among other things, include the circumstances of one's history and this will unavoidably include such things as sex, gender, orientation, nationality, language, or ethnicity, and many other filial identities. But whereas all these elements might figure into an identity-constituting self-narrative as givens to which one can have a response of one sort or another, other group identifications are thoroughly voluntary and one remains responsible for them.

In addition, sport does not always prove a free zone of self-expressive play either because the structure of the particular sport is not amenable or because the participants' goals are not amenable with each other. Sport that is directed solely to winning and turning a profit, as is professional sport, tends to provide little scope for genuine play, though it would be false to say that it excludes it entirely. But amateur sport as well can be a frustrating experience for the player who finds his goals at odds with those of his fellow players, and even more if they have no interest in play that challenges reified play norms. For many, sadly, "play" is just a job.

What much of this amounts to is that participants, especially in sport, frequently lose sight of play's pretensive quality, both in respect of its conventional aspects and its potential for pretend-play.⁴¹ On such occasions, the players or the observers take the conventional world structured by the norms of play *as real*, rather than treating it *as if* it were real. The champions of sport normativity treat sport structures and practices as natural and so are scandalised by those who treat them as what they are: contingent expressions of the human need for self-expression and creation through play. Athletes who cross sport's gender boundaries throw this contingency into relief and, analogously with drag performance, they demonstrate the nonessential character of (sport) social norms, even while upholding those various norms. Thus, for example, women who want to box or play hockey, men doing synchronised swimming, gay men in football, or same sex pairs figure skating, all defy the gender normativity that actual sport convention reiterates and imposes on play, thereby restoring some of play's potential for self-expression, even while seeking to play according to the same conventions.⁴²

All this reiterates a point made earlier, that these are actions that have their significance not strictly *as actions*, but as signs of contextualised meanings. It is not *what* the individual does

⁴¹I am not referring here to the complaint "it's just a game", commonly uttered when it is perceived that the play is being taken "too seriously". Play *does* need to be taken seriously on one level, while remembering its nonserious quality on another.

⁴²It is a serious task to restore the non-serious, the hypothetical and ironical to what has become reified in this way. In such a case, it would be wrong to see the player as deliberately ironical about play itself. He or she, after all, just wants to play. And so, at the same time as we seem to see a disanalogy between travesty as drag and travesty as serious play, i.e., the lack of ironical approach to play in the project of the serious player as opposed to the drag artist whose entire presentation is an internal construction and perhaps a deliberate provocation; the parallel returns in that both are engaged in following the internal normativity of their practice: the drag artist replicates the rules of gender in a different place—and so does the serious and transgressive player who pursues a rule-defined form of play in an otherwise proscribed location, i.e., a different place.

in the strictly physical sense that makes their actions serious play, playing-at, or travesty, or none of these, since those are strictly speaking indistinguishable from what any one else does, but what those actions done by them signify within the wider communicative framework where they are assumed to be naturally excluded from performing such actions.

Ultimately, what the drag artist and the transgressive sport-player do is to subvert assumptions about the fixity of certain aspects of human being and interaction. Both pose questions concerning the possibilities of self-expression and both do this by playing, and especially by playing in otherwise unanticipated ways. In playing, whether by design or not, they reassert the fact of play and reappropriate its possibilities for self-trial and expression. Both follow the fundamental rule of play: to explore its possibilities for self-expression and self-creation without regard for arbitrary boundaries that say “only so much self-discovery and no further”. They take explicit advantage of play as a privileged zone of expression, both in the sense that they are enabled to play at versions of themselves without commitment to the actuality of the identities they assume in play, and also in the sadly practical sense that they can frequently “get away with” such expressions as play to an extent that would be dangerous outside of the hypothetical world of play. In the end, by reasserting the play-ness of much of what is taken for reality, gender and sport subversives restore by their example the awareness of the as-if-ness of much everyday performance and thus argue not only the proper seriousness with which we ought to approach play, but the playfulness with which we might occasionally view our selves.

Conclusion

I have sought to argue in the foregoing that play is a valuable means through which individuals may develop their own identities. The hypothetical trial of possible expressions of self constitutes a strategy in the development of narrative self-accounting, which is itself a strategy of identity configuration. In other words, play is at once a medium of self-telling and of self (including identity) construction. As indicated in the first section of this paper, the narrator of one’s self-story is a creative improviser but not independent of the narrative process itself. Moreover, one’s self-activity is situated within a specific context of social interaction and meaning. What one can make or tell of oneself is therefore constrained by a complex of normative structures that determine the comprehensibility of one’s narrative and identity. These include linguistic convention, social expectations concerning behaviour and gender presentation, and requirements concerning accuracy and coherence of one’s self-account.

Butler argues against the notion that one can construct a complete or fully coherent self-account at all and suggests that to demand this is to prefer the accounting over the truth of the life so accounted for, which may be more truthfully rendered by enigmatic or disjoint fragments than by a seamless whole.⁴³ It is true that a forced coherence may well distort the truth of the life so narrated, and the demand for such coherence may thus constitute or disguise a violence against the one of whom the demand is made. It doesn’t follow from this, however, that disjointedness is in all, if any, cases a good condition for a human life: coherence in one’s life (and thus only derivatively in one’s self-account) may still be a desirable goal, even if not fully attainable.

But how does the exploration of hypothetical identities through play fit with an ideal of

⁴³*Giving an Account of Oneself, op. cit.* 63-64.

self-coherence: are not these in fact at odds? I would say not, on the ground precisely that play is fundamentally *pretensive*—one *plays* at possible identities, which is then a means of trying out one's own best fit. It is a way of figuring out for oneself what is most coherent with one's life or, at least, how one understands oneself to be. All of which offers another reason, if one is needed, why rigidly pre-determined play can be destructive of developing selves.

This play also introduces uncertainties that may need to be resolved. This then opens the door to potentially subversive play, play that forces a refiguring of one's, and perhaps others', self-accounts. In this respect, what I have argued here echoes the reconceptualisation of critique proposed by Foucault and summarised rather nicely by Butler:

The subject forms itself in relation to a set of codes, prescriptions, or norms and does so in ways that not only (a) reveal self-constitution to be a sort of *poiesis* but (b) establish self-making as part of the broader operation of critique....There is no making of oneself (*poiesis*) outside of a mode of subjectivation (*assujettissement*) and, hence, no self-making outside of the norms that orchestrate the possible forms that a subject may take. The practice of critique then exposes the limits of the historical scheme of things, the epistemological and ontological horizon within which subjects come to be at all. To make oneself in such a way that one exposes those limits is precisely to engage in an aesthetics of the self that maintains a critical relation to existing norms.⁴⁴

This also strikes me as a fair description of what *should* happen in sport-play, and what *does* happen in subversive (gender-crossing) sport-play, as well as in other subversive forms of gender performance. I do not, however, see this deconstruction of normative identity as ultimately destructive of individual identity as such, but a component in the individual's life-long project of self-constitution and self-narration. Play is not by any means antithetical to self-identity, but a vital path to its enhancement and what coherence it might eventually achieve.

⁴⁴*Giving an Account of Oneself*, *op. cit.* 17. See also Butler, "What is Critique? An Essay on Foucault's Virtue", in *The Judith Butler Reader*, Sara Salih (ed.) (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2004), 304-322.