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# Using *Spielraum* for a Normative Definition of Politics: Obama's Play Politics and Trump's Asceticism

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## Abstract

The terms “politics” and “political” have become so overdetermined that it is difficult to use them in any effective manner. We argue that this has dangerous political consequences, and that this could be addressed by providing a new, sounder, notion of politics. This paper argues that defining politics in relation to the notion of play can provide a notion both intuitively appealing and able to withstand the problematic overdeterminations. We argue that politics is the set of practices through which the indeterminate of *Spielraum* is made more determinate. This suggests that politics is always partly a matter of play: it is about instituting values without making any claims about the legitimacy of this instituting act. With reference to Huizinga and Nietzsche's analyses of play, we define play as the living unity of seriousness and frivolity, and non-play as either seriousness without frivolity or frivolity without seriousness. In order to illustrate this, we comparatively analyse the attitudes of Barack Obama and Donald Trump in the single context of the well-known yearly White House Correspondent's Dinner. There, we see two opposed attitudes to playfulness. Our analysis allows us to apply our *Spielraum* model of politics to show that the thrust of Obama's attitude involves an embrace of the non-foundational nature of politics as play, whereas Trump's attitude is politicidal: it is animated by a refusal to acknowledge its own lack of foundation, leading to an oscillation between over-seriousness and over-frivolity.

**Keywords** Political · Play · *Spielraum* · Political legitimacy · Asceticism · Populism

*“And Donald Trump is here. Still...”*  
*Barack Obama, White House Correspondents' Dinner, 2015*

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## Stating the Problem: Politicization Versus Politics as Play

The notion of politics and its related adjective, “political,” are ubiquitous, but rather often loosely or ill-defined. This is not uncommon with thick concepts: after all, concepts that combine the normative and the descriptive are subject to all sorts of ambiguities and debates. However, in the contemporary situation, such ambiguity has allowed the very notion of politics to become one of the central stakes of political contestation. Claiming that something is “political” is a way of scoring political points, either by accusing one’s opponent of illegitimately politicising a situation or by giving oneself access to an issue by claiming it is within one’s remit as political agent. A case in point here are the recurring debates around gun control in the United States, where every mass shooting brings with it the predictable calls for resisting the “politicization” of the gun issue. Those who use the accusation of politicization imply: “Don’t refer to the mass shootings as an argument for tightening gun laws,” whereas said laws are conveniently understood to be a political issue (see, for instance, Peters 2022; Bump, 2022; Lim & Skinner, 2022; Lopez, 2017).

In the area of media and journalism, the same problem has been chronically resurfacing when it comes to determining what the duty of journalistic neutrality involves. Is it neutral, for instance, to fact check politicians’ lies? Or, to refer to a recent case from the UK, is Gary Lineker, a sports commentator for the BBC, in breach of the BBC charter when he compares Home Secretary’s Suella Braverman’s anti-refugees rhetoric to Germany in the 1930s? Is Braverman’s policy a kind of policy that deserves the same protection that political views enjoy? Is the fact that these policies are enacted by a politician enough to suggest that criticizing it constitutes political position-taking? Or does it amount, as Lineker and his supporters would claim, to the refusal of the politicization of human misery? Here, politics, political, or (de-)politicization have become a free-for-all that can be used to varying ends by either dismissing or endorsing an idea. In short, the rhetoric of politics is itself an instrument of power, and, like any instrument of power, it needs legislating on. Theoretically speaking, so we contend, this comes down to providing a normative definition of politics that distinguishes it from politicking.

To avoid just such a conceptual free-for-all, democracy theorists, from Hannah Arendt (2005) to Claude Lefort (1989) and Chantal Mouffe (2005), or from Crick (1962) to Enrique Dussel (2008), have long argued that there should be a normative component to the notion of politics. To them, politics, properly understood, is not a mere matter of who commands and who obeys, or the management of people, interests, or resources. If we make a distinction, here, between politics and politicking, we should use politicking to refer to the common descriptive sense of politics as this that politicians do: what happens in the pursuit and exercise of power. Yet, this does not always qualify as politics proper. Politics in the normative sense is a humanising practice and experience that is valuable in and of itself in its seeking a legitimate distribution of power. This implies that, although politicking is not enough for politics, some politicking may be political. Here, a normative definition of politics will help us to analyze the particularities of situations.

The revival of attention to the work of Karl Schmitt (1996) in the 1990s has seen attempts to pry the descriptive and the normative apart. To several readers of Schmitt, politics is the realm of raw power, and therefore, it is first and foremost an object of observation and description; no normativity to see here. Still, the actual development of the thought of those authors seems to belie their own point: the claim that makes politics an object of description almost immediately exceeds its own bounds and turns into an *endorsement* of the practice of power-politics. This is more than a mere matter of semantics, for the regime that governs the use of the language of politics is integral to the polarization matrix that characterises public discourse in much of the “democratic West”.

Media scholars Amy Ross Arguedas and others have concluded that, for instance in the USA, “public opinion overall on many issues has not become markedly more polarized in recent years *on average*, it *has* increased among the most politically engaged” (Ross Arguedas et al., 2022). Ross Arguedas et al. base themselves on studies performed by Markus Prior (2013) and Lilliana Mason (2015), and it is worth returning to these earlier studies. Mason, for example, distinguishes between social polarization and issue polarization and concludes: “The result is a nation that agrees on many things but is bitterly divided nonetheless” (2015: 128). Prior, in turn, concludes that although there may be “no firm evidence that partisan media are making ordinary Americans more partisan” it is also the case that there is ideological polarization, “largely confined to a small, but highly involved and influential, segment of the population” (Prior, 2013: 23). This bitter divide allows a limited set of polarizing actors to determine the spectrum of possible positions, making any attempt at settling a debate or arbitrating between positions into a politicized matter. After all, tighter gun laws seem to be a proposal apt to be rejected as “politicized” in the United States for the mere reasons that *some* politicians oppose them (it takes but one, but they are *de facto* granted outsize power in designing the debate), whilst it is a non-political matter in New Zealand for the mere reason that there, politicians do not. This *de facto* gives outsize political influence to fringe elements. It is an issue reminiscent of the debate surrounding creationism in schools, where radical elements get their way under cover of the principle that one should “teach the controversy”.

One can lament this confusion, these shady dealings and the fact that politics as an ethos is under attack, but one should also choose to confront the confusion. We think the contemporary situation calls for some scholarly policing around the notion of politics. Again, what is needed is a normative definition of politics—a definition able to discriminate between the political and the non-political—*on both descriptive and normative grounds*. We propose that a normative definition of politics should be designed with reference to the notion of *play*. We argue that politics worthy of the name possesses characteristics paradigmatically associated with the phenomenon of play and that the shedding of these properties corresponds to the drifting of politics away from the field proper to it. This is a proposal with a long history, from Heraclitus to Nietzsche, Huizinga and Ortega y Gasset, all of whom have experimented with a definition of politics that appeals to play, that determines the non-political as either the rejection of play or the foreign to play, and that determines the political ethos as a playful ethos.

The central feature of play that we find essential to politics is *Spielraum*. That is to say: we consider *Spielraum* as a necessary condition for politics. This *Spielraum*-condition has two implications:

Firstly, *Spielraum* refers to both ‘leeway’ and ‘play space’. Accordingly, we consider politics to take place within a play space, or to serve the construction of one. This is to say that politics, like play, accepts the arbitrary. To avoid any confusion, this does not mean that leeway stands for compromise. This would presuppose that the leeway is what is left after the extremes have made their claim. On the contrary, as we shall argue, playing involves the space of leeway and it precedes the determinations that arise from it. We consider politics, then, to be the practice of dealing with ‘leeway’ or producing leeway. This implies that if politics embraces arbitrariness, it rejects *complete* arbitrariness. With *Spielraum*, politics insulates itself from totalitarianism, seen as the absorption of difference. Taking our cue from Friedrich Nietzsche’s *Genealogy of Morality* (1887), Johan Huizinga’s *Homo Ludens* (1938, 1940, 1971) and Eugen Fink’s *Play as Symbol of the World* (1960), we define *Spielraum* as a paradoxical structure which tends equally towards the affirmation of frivolity and of seriousness.

Secondly, our contention is that politics proper embraces play as its own ground, as opposed to poorer kinds of politics that use play towards its own demise. We claim that the proper definition of politics will have to do justice to its dependence on the model of play: the political domain lies in the space between frivolity and over-seriousness and resists the temptations presented by both poles. Note again that none of this makes play into a middle-term equidistant from frivolity and seriousness. Rather play is the source on the basis of which both arise and subsequently define themselves in contrast to each other.

To test our normative conceptualisation in practice, we shall focus on the yearly event of the White House Correspondence Dinner in the years of the Obama administration as capturing an essential element in the relations between play and politics, and in this context, we will consider Donald Trump’s refusal to respect these relations.

### ***Spielraum*: Politics as Leeway or Play Space**

The urgency with which we must think through the role of play in relation to politics lies in the fact that in an increasingly polarized media field some of the participants are practicing, or training for, a kind of politicking that fails to qualify as politics in the proper sense, and which ignores, or chokes *Spielraum* with a perverting over-seriousness, be it religiously or ideologically inspired. This is contrasted with the practice of some politicians who understand that play is fundamental to political life. To them, politics is about creating play spaces that offer leeway, spaces within which conflicts can be sustained without exploding, or within which frictions can prove productive in the creation of a world. Here, the work of politics—the conjugation of a potential multiplicity of worlds—is only possible if we take up the kind of play that works by means of a match between, or a mutual containment of, seriousness and puerility.

The case of Donald Trump has already become a *locus classicus* for such discussions. Most of the time, these focus on the cartoonish, superficial, and performative aspects of his public persona, as well as the nihilism about truth or morality that it seems to express or that he seems to embody. These discussions often conclude by associating Trump's political practice with a certain sense of playfulness and a turning away from seriousness. In our view, however, this analysis remains half-heartedly on the level of cultural representation. On the ideological level, we argue that the phenomenon associated with Trump should be analyzed in terms of an inability to play. It seems to us that the nihilism that has been rightfully attributed to him is not to be taken as a form of play and that it would be wrong to oppose it to seriousness. Rather, as pointed out earlier, frivolity and seriousness are very close cousins because, taken to their extreme, they share the option that only this that is serious should be taken seriously and that anything else should not be taken seriously *at all*. With help from Nietzsche, we shall characterize this extreme option as the ascetic attitude. Play, on the contrary, involves the idea that things can be taken seriously even if they are not intrinsically serious. Our resulting analysis of the Trump phenomenon presents it as an ascetic refusal to engage with politics as play.

Let us reconsider Friedrich Nietzsche when he contrasts play with *asceticism* in *On the Genealogy of Morality* (1887) and cognate texts, as well as his famous quote and famous idea about play in *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886). There, he states: "The maturity of man—that means, to have reacquired the seriousness that one had as a child at play" (Maxims 94). For Nietzsche therefore, like for Fink and Huizinga, seriousness is not the opposite of play. The opposite of play, rather is absolutism. This is not because absolutism stands outside of play, but because absolutism is play that misunderstands itself: play leads us to seriousness, and this may lead to the illusion that what we take seriously *is* serious. In this sense, Nietzsche redefines absolutism as asceticism: the belief that seriousness is a property intrinsic to objects. By contrast, Nietzsche argues, seriousness is a property of human experience, the paradigm of which is play. For Nietzsche, taking something seriously doesn't mean recognizing that it possesses the property of seriousness, but rather, it means bestowing seriousness to it.

In order to connect Nietzsche's general account of experience as play to the specific field of politics, let us also reconsider Maurice Merleau-Ponty's 'Note on Machiavelli' (1964). There, Merleau-Ponty construes Machiavelli as saying that the communal existence of people with different interests is only possible if a ruler respects the differences between his subjects and uses them as the matter of politics:

By putting conflict and struggle at the origins of social power, he [Machiavelli] did not mean to say that agreement was impossible; he meant to underline the condition for a power which does not mystify, that is, participation in a common situation. (1964: 215)

The mystification that Merleau-Ponty refers to is a characteristic of the political stance that we will call, after Nietzsche, political asceticism. Such a view of power is mystifying according to Merleau-Ponty because it relies on the illusion that power can be grounded absolutely. In other words, it assumes that differences and conflict are anomalies of a political field otherwise homogenous and whose

vocation is to achieve a final resolution in civil peace. To paraphrase Claude Lefort, another neo-Machiavellian: Machiavelli represents the abandonment of the notion of *solution* in politics. The point was made before Machiavelli, at the beginning of the fourteenth century by Marsilius of Padua in *The Defender of the Peace*; it was reaffirmed when Hannah Arendt stated that political philosophy went in the wrong direction from its inception in Plato, because the practice of politics is forever messy; and it was a point explored and emphasized more recently by Chantal Mouffe. The consequence of considering the messy work of politics as a way to deal with differences of interest in terms of the execution of power is that any truly political order has to contend with a difference that it envisages as a factor of unpredictability. Merleau-Ponty calls this factor of unpredictability *adversity*, which he takes to be a near-synonym of Machiavelli's *fortuna*. This unpredictable outcome of any political contest and of political order is not a matter of pure chance but of the interplay between chance and political skill. It is a form of politics in which political skill consists of the willingness to consider politics as a perpetually insufficiently founded play space, combined with the ability to give or find leeway.

In contrast, what Merleau-Ponty calls 'mystified power' (the belief in an ultimate ground for political peace and ultimate standard of good politics) is over-serious, and because it is over-serious, it fears ridicule. Its stakes are high because the methods used to achieve unambiguous power are eminently ambiguous, and therefore, the more unambiguous one's power is, the more threatened it is by the possibility that this ambiguity be brought to the surface. As Merleau-Ponty argued, "power is always precarious". Certain methods can ensure the maintenance of power only through the realm of appearances and these appearances may be interpreted as either prestigious or ridiculous. What makes them register as prestigious rather than ridiculous depends on a situation in which power is taken for granted, which demands that the public see the spectacle of power as an expression of a pre-existing and ultimately grounded power. Still, this is precarious. If people conceive that the Prince can be taken to be ridiculous, the whole edifice collapses. The ability to choose whether to interpret power as ridiculous or prestigious is what we consider to be the essence of political citizenship.

One can summon a host of real-world examples of the convergence between asceticism and the rejection of play, ranging from landmark historical events and situations—Nietzsche would list the "slave revolt in morality" and Huizinga the Wannsee conference—to the anecdotal. It is anecdotal, for example, that former US president Donald Trump, once installed as president, refused to participate in 2017 and 2018 in what was a nearly century-old tradition: the White House Correspondents' dinner. It is also more than anecdotal. The Machiavellian point about the dialectic between prestige and the ridiculous is illustrated by our case: the tradition of the White House Correspondents' involves making fun of politics publicly. The event is a paradigm of political humor, which relies on the awareness that the status quo is not based on any solid ground—or is defined by play. It is this aspect of play's groundlessness that, in our reading, explains Trump's absence in the years 2017 and 2018. The narrative that underpins his power is at odds with the idea that power can be laughed at and remain power.

Trump's absence from the dinner was not entirely new: he had also skipped the meeting in 2016, when Barack Obama, on the occasion of his last dinner speech, already appeared to sense the inconceivable future, when he opened:

Good evening, everybody. It is an honor to be here at my last—and perhaps *the* last—White House Correspondents' Dinner.

[Laughter and applause.]

You all look great. The end of the Republic has never looked better.

[Laughter and applause.]

In what followed Obama made fun of Trump, noting his absence, and his candidacy for the Republican party nomination. He praised Trump's abilities as a potential president by pointing to his impressive international network—"Miss Sweden, Miss Argentina, Miss Azerbaijan". More soberingly, he ended with a praise of the distinct roles of the President and the free press, with the latter acting in the service of truth. Still, what seemed to be a successful joke—"The end of the Republic has never looked better"—would a year later no longer be a laughing matter. Obama's quip about the White House dinner as "perhaps the last" was almost a case of clairvoyance. And by the following year, the free press as a guarantee in the search for truth would be targeted as "the enemy of the people" by a relentless, humourless attack from the side of the new President and his allies captured in the phrase that it refurbished: "fake news".

In this context, Trump's refusal to attend the White House dinner was perhaps a sign that he did not much like to be made fun of, or lacked the capacity to make fun of himself. More fundamentally, the issue is that the political resources that Trump and his likes build their power on are polarised by a reference to an absolute ground, so that they cannot countenance any playful politics or any reminder that the status quo is not, in fact, grounded. Obama's quip that "The end of the Republic has never looked better" is especially meaningful in this context. It should not be taken as a mere comment on some epochal crisis. If so, we wouldn't know how to understand "never," or even why Obama would find any levity in the situation. Rather, the implication is that the encounter of power and the press in itself constitutes both the essence of the Republic and its demise. In short, there is no difference between being a Republic and being at risk. Obama is rather acknowledging the fact that "the Republic" is in a state of constant crisis, and that the Dinner is a landmark that celebrates the survival of this precarious balance. By joking about it, Obama sends the message that precarity, politically speaking, must be embraced.

With regard to this fundamental precariousness, we distinguish between two political attitudes. On the hand, we trace a low-stake attitude with Obama, who looks for a political play space—a *Spielraum*—and who harbors lower (less totalitarian) political ambitions by considering it essential that there be leeway. On the other hand, we identify a high-stake attitude on the side of Trump, where a mystified take on power fears ridicule, and high-stake ambitions desire to eliminate humor for the sake of a reinforced status quo: a totalitarian tendency. Here we can already sense an opportunity to use *Spielraum* for a normative assessment of politics. This is not to say that there is no weaponization of humor on the Trump-sphere. Some of the constituencies that backed up Trump, like the alt-right, can be seen to use humor



insofar as they consider themselves to be insurgents. In this capacity, they use humor to undermine the status quo embodied in the power they oppose. Insofar as they think of themselves as being *in* power, however, it's the reverse. There they come to be political ascetics. To see why this is the case we need a more in-depth reconsideration of Nietzsche's thoughts on play and asceticism.

## Play and the Over-Serious in Asceticism

Nietzsche's claim that the maturity of humans means that they "have reacquired the seriousness that one had as a child at play," conveys the adult's fascination before the concentration and sense of wonder of young children. Nietzsche appeals to the figure of the child to indicate that in their original state, play and seriousness are not opposed as we might think, but unified. For Nietzsche, the issue is whether a mature form of politics can consist in a play that has retained some sense of an original seriousness (ie: the kind of seriousness experienced in play, not its degraded version which refers to some objective ground). The synthesis of play and seriousness underpins Nietzsche's entire meta-ethics and ontology. We will come back to the meta-ethical element at the end of this paper when we define politics conclusively and normatively on the basis of play. Let us first consider the ontological aspect of Nietzsche's aphorism: that maturity consists in having the ability to play seriously. The issue can be unpacked on the basis of two questions. The first one asks what a world looks like in which the unity of play and seriousness is possible. The second one asks how an ontological view can be adjusted to take into account not only the originary unity of play and seriousness but also the possibility of their historical disjunction. The chronicling of the disjunction between play and seriousness is the object of *The Genealogy of Morality*, which Nietzsche regarded as a direct extension of *Beyond Good and Evil*—the text with the aphorism about the seriousness of play.

If Nietzsche's statement brings together two concepts that are usually considered as opposites, this entails that in undoing the opposition of play and seriousness, he leaves both concepts without opposites.<sup>1</sup> Play can now only be opposed to "non-play" and seriousness to "non-seriousness". But adding the particle "non-" before a substantive is admitting defeat: such a semantic trick does nothing to tell us what "non-play" and "non-seriousness" might look like positively. Although it is impossible to prove it entirely here, we take the fact that Nietzsche deprives language of a positive concept of "non-play" and "non-seriousness" as revealing of Nietzsche's view that we do not have any positive experience of "non-play" or of "non-seriousness". In other words, play is the basic source of the human experience of seriousness. Play teaches us what seriousness is and any sense of seriousness will always be referring to play. The only thing that might occur is that one forgets this fact.

For the sake of clarity, let us say then that *play* = playfulness + seriousness, and that, phenomenologically speaking, the originary ground of experience is play (this

<sup>1</sup> Eugen Fink (1960/2016), who wrote his study on play in the very years as he was teaching on Nietzsche, questions the general habit of opposing play and seriousness too.

is also Huizinga's and Fink's argument). One possible objection to the ontological claim comes to mind here. If Nietzsche declares that some instances of play have seriousness in them, is it enough to claim that they all do? This provokes us to ask whether one can play without seriousness or be serious without play. Bearing in mind Gadamer's analysis of rule-breaking, playing without seriousness is hard to imagine or looks too much like cheating (with respect to this, Huizinga talks of the unserious player as a spoilsport). This, in turn, means either the death of the play or the opening up of a meta-play of cheating. Play without seriousness is unimaginable (even for those who equate play, wrongly, with fun). Seriousness without play on the other hand can be imagined and Nietzsche recognizes its existence. He calls it asceticism. But this asceticism remains genealogically dependent on the reference to play for the reasons outlined above: asceticism is play that misunderstands itself by claiming an objective ground.

What is important to Nietzsche is that the inclusion of seriousness within play in no way suggests that play is involved with any sense of objectivity. Fink writes that "the playing child lives in two dimensions" (for instance, one where the doll is a child and one where it is a doll), and this play shows that "there exists a very peculiar, though in no way pathological, 'schizophrenia,' a splitting of the human being" (Fink, 2016: 24). Donald Winnicott calls this a state of "near-hallucination" (Winnicott, 1971: 52) and Johan Huizinga calls it a "half-belief" (VW, V: 160). They all characterize this state by using the word "magic" or "magical," in keeping with the tradition from Empedocles to the Cartesians, as that which bridges the gap separating subjective and objective reality.

Although Fink and Winnicott are correct in pointing out the difference between play and hallucination, their account fails to provide a positive concept of play. Fink declares that "it is a problem of the greatest profundity and utmost difficulty for thought to unfold precisely how actuality and non-actuality pervade one another in human play" (Fink, 2016: 29f.). But of course, it is a problem made all the more difficult by the originary position from which Fink poses the question. For his position explicitly follows Plato in making appearances secondary to "actualities" and play and imagination secondary to reality. But should we really say, as Fink implies, that play borrows its seriousness from the seriousness of the real world? Nietzsche doesn't think so. If it is true that play remains within the realm of fiction, this doesn't mean that seriousness should be regarded as a reference to reality at all. According to Nietzsche, reality and subjectivity are two abusive hypostizations of aspects of a unique thing: playing. It is not playing that needs explaining with reference to reality and subjectivity, but reality (structured by the divide between the subjective and the objective) that needs explaining with reference to playing. In other words, it is not only our sense of seriousness but our sense of reality in general that is genealogically and ontologically derived from play. Play precedes reality, and reality is constructed out of play. This makes play ontologically primary: being is play.

With this reformulation of being, we come to a hurdle familiar to all ontologists: if being is 'x,' how come it needs uncovering? What is the place of the misunderstanding about being within being? Nietzsche's strategy is well known: blame it on historical developments (collectively) or on aging out of childhood (individually). Attributing the unity of seriousness and play to the infantile psyche seems to

indicate that Nietzsche regards this unity as primary and the opposition between the two as contingent: a subsequent effect of the degradation of age, education, and civilization. More precisely, Nietzsche claims that it is “immature” to oppose play to seriousness and mature to regain their unity. Regarding the question of psychological development, this ontological position makes Nietzsche draw a pre-psychoanalytical distinction between “age” and “maturity”. It is mature to be childlike. In his discussion of play, Winnicott makes a similar remark when he writes: “...where playing is not possible then the work done by the therapist is directed towards bringing the patient from a state of not being able to play to a state of being able to play” (Winnicott 1971: 38). The inability to play is sickness, and maturity (the successful therapy) is the ability to play.

Nietzsche too regards the inability to play as a disease. He calls this disease asceticism, as the third essay of GM explains at length. But asceticism is also described as a fetish for seriousness: “the earthly seriousness and misery” Nietzsche writes, is “the crudest form of perversion: the ascetic ideal” (Nietzsche, 1887: III. 3). Later on, he calls the “ascetic priest” the “actual representative of seriousness” (1887: III. 11). We should not let the words confuse us: seriousness in this context is meant in a different sense than the “good” seriousness of the child. Yet, Nietzsche uses the word “Ernst” for both. This is because the difference between ascetic seriousness and play-seriousness is not intrinsic but relative: it is a difference *in its relation to play*. Ascetic seriousness is an abusive purification and hypostization of the seriousness found in play. Bad seriousness (like all things bad for Nietzsche) is bad because it is pure, it is purified seriousness: seriousness without play. What Nietzsche rejects is not seriousness as such (which he praises children for possessing) but the ascetic *separation* of playfulness and seriousness. Nevertheless, the ambivalence in Nietzsche’s use of *Ernst* is telling and reveals the ambiguity of play itself. The seriousness of asceticism is derived from the seriousness of play, and yet, asceticism has come to stand against play. This is why Nietzsche echoes the title of the third essay of GM (“What is the meaning of the ascetic ideals?”) with this other question: “What is the meaning of all seriousness?” (1887: III, 11). Seriousness, in short, is equated with asceticism. Nietzsche therefore presents his genealogy of asceticism as the history of the dissociation of play and seriousness. This is a dissociation that leads to an opposition and finally an extermination of play at the hands of ascetic seriousness. How does this extermination eliminate politics?

## The Non-Political: Rules of a Game With no Outside

If play is playfulness plus seriousness, the playfulness refers to the awareness that a given game, like politics, is “only a game” and that seriousness concerns the interest for the game to go on, that is: an awareness of the undesirability to cheat. If asceticism is seriousness without playfulness, the question concerning asceticism becomes: how can players become so serious that they fail to see playfulness in their games? The Nietzschean response relies on the implicit concept of rules and the

ambiguity of games.<sup>2</sup> Games are defined by rules that act as the limits of the *Spielraum*. As limits, rules are always ambiguous; they are limits of the game *and* limits of the non-game, and they belong to the two realms even though these realms are incompatible. Minimally, we could say that rules initiate the separation of seriousness and play just as they ensure their unity. It is from the non-game perspective that a game is seen as “only a game,” but it is from within the game that the game is seen as “serious”. Rules protect the absolute system of judgment within the game, but they are impotent outside of it.

Fink expresses this by saying that even though the *Spielraum* is free, it is not “limitlessly free”. The experience of game-playing contains a suggestion of the absolute (considered within the *Spielraum*) and of relativity (considered from outside of it). The work of asceticism in this context is to transcend the play towards a new kind of game: a game with no outside. In such a game, game-rules (relative to the arbitrarily endorsed game) become moral-rules (relative to nothing). The ethics of rule-following that is followed for the sake of the game, becomes an ethics of morals-following that are followed for their own sake (Fink, 2016: 23). According to Nietzsche, our primary experience of moral value is derived from rules, and the compelling power of values is genealogically derived from our desire to play. The seriousness of the child at play is the measure of her desire to play and of her *care* for the game. This implies that asceticism is based upon two notions, both of which are contradictory: first, the notion of a game with no outside, and second, the notion of intrinsic rules.

Nietzsche, by contrast, argues that the absolute cannot be maintained if the game-structure of reality is entirely rejected. It is this game-structure that initiates us to the experience of the absolute: the absolute right to *kick* the ball and the absolute interdiction to hold it in your hands, or the absolute power of the referee, are the genealogical correlates of the monarchy of divine right. And yet, the subsequent endorsement of the absolute, the establishment of such a thing as a divine right, does away with the hypothetical character of the absolute in play. So how can the game-structure be maintained without an outside? Nietzsche’s explanation relies on what phenomenologists later came to call a *horizon*: a horizon is a limit that has no outside. It is present enough to structure our world, but not tangible enough to even *suggest* any realm that exceeds it. Even though he doesn’t use this Husserlian term, Nietzsche is aware of the conceptual potential of the notion of horizon and he uses it to structure his account of asceticism. More specifically, he describes the rise of asceticism as coinciding with two game-concepts that are brought to the status of horizons: death and god.

To understand how the concept of death is a play-concept, we should return to Nietzsche’s understanding of the tragic. Death is a certainty that liberates the strong and allows them to live their entire life as a game and a grand bargain. The reason is we can always regard our own life from the perspective of vanity or meaninglessness (Hinman, 1974). Death—which determines the *Spielraum* of life—is the rule

<sup>2</sup> Games are the right locus to see play in action and this is why we describe games here. However, as we will discuss in the conclusion, one would be seriously mistaken to think that games define play.

of the game of life. It is its limit. Beyond death, seriousness vanishes, and therefore our death is the most serious matter of our life; it is the source of seriousness. Still, even death has only a relative value: its (negative) value dies with us. Nietzsche regards this as a liberating thought for the strong (who are now entitled to assign meaning to their lives freely) and a death sentence for the weak (who are unable to regard themselves as legitimate meaning-makers). As is well-known on the other hand, Nietzsche insists that the Christian culture of death is a paradoxical culture of immortality. In Christianity, there is no outside of life, and life extends to the horizon; man's serious investments are in principle immune to any external contestation. This gives major importance to the life people live after death since it is there that retributions will take place, infinite in time and intensity. In other words, the bringing of the concept of death to the status of an inaccessible horizon allows for the hyperbolic rhetoric of asceticism which sucks the playfulness out of the game of life by magnifying infinitely the seriousness of our every game-decisions. The momentous importance given to our every act makes people lose the trust in themselves and in life required for healthy playing (Nietzsche, 1887, II, 16; see also Winnicott, 1971: 136; Chouraqui, 2018).<sup>3</sup>

The other horizontal concept is god. Without forcing the analogy too much, we could regard god as the hypostization of the game-referee. Nietzsche comes close to doing just this when he provides a genealogy of the concept of god as taking root in the one that sets the rules arbitrarily (here, the analogy with play is direct) and becomes the one who attains “transcendence”—Nietzsche's word for “horizontality” (Fink, 2016: 20). This transcendence is attained gradually, via a series of motions through which the tutelary figure recedes into the world of the inaccessible, into mythical deep time. Like a horizon, it is accessible enough to structure our life (as a memory), but not enough to relieve us of our infinite duty (the ancestor's being dead makes them unable to intervene). So god is no longer a referee whose absolute power is restricted to one given *Spielraum*. He rather becomes the referee of the entire *Weltraum*: a referee whose jurisdiction extends to the horizon. Now, in Nietzsche's view, this movement from rule to the horizon, even if it *explains* the birth of moralistic discourses, does not *justify* them. The movement from rule to horizon only formulates a clearer statement of the contradiction at work in moral discourses. The latter borrow their resources from play experience and use them to remove play from the human field. The result is morality. Asceticism transforms games into what they are not: seriousness without playfulness.

We can now return to our case. Our focus will be to compare the attitudes displayed by Obama and Trump at the Correspondents' dinner in terms of contrasting relations to play and by extension different notions of political power. In particular, we will argue on the basis of the foregoing Nietzschean analysis, that Trump's political attitude at the Dinner is symptomatic of asceticism, while Obama's should be analyzed in terms of play.

<sup>3</sup> GM, II, 16 shows that it does so by removing the trust necessary for one to engage in play.

## Humor as a Political Skill: Politics as Play Space

The tradition of the Correspondents' Dinner has its origin in a conflict in 1914 between President Woodrow Wilson and the press surrounding the allegation that too many of Wilson's statements were being misrepresented by journalists. Allegedly, the press lacked professional standards. White House correspondents then took the responsibility upon themselves to promote professionalism and to agree upon rules for reporting on White House policies. To this end, they founded the White House Correspondents' Association (WHCA), an organization charged with upholding journalistic standards and promoting professionalism. If Wilson had threatened to no longer give any press conference because his words were not taken *seriously* by the press, the self-instituted rules of the game by the WHCA were meant to maintain the possibility of dialogue with the president, while protecting the separation between politicians and the press and securing the latter's independence in their ability to determine for themselves whether and how much to take Wilson's statements *fully* seriously. The setting down of the rules of the game helped the WHCA to defend independent journalism against excessive political interference. All of this amounted to a successful attempt at defining the rules of a political game that offers all parties involved manoeuvrability: i.e., it established, in this specific area, *Spielraum*.

The Association inaugurated the tradition of the dinner on 7 May 1921. It offered the President and the press an opportunity to appear as 'good sports' by enjoying an evening together having fun despite differences of opinion.<sup>4</sup> As the dinner, since then, was mostly used to award grants and to honor journalists, it became more a matter of entertainment, and coinciding criticism, towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, when celebrities were brought in to make fun of 'Washington,' but also to be part of a mediatized event (Argetsinger & Roberts, 2023).

In this context, we will contrast Trump's refusal to take part in the event with a historical speech by Barack Obama on the occasion of the 2011 dinner. This speech has become infamous because some have argued that Trump's decision to run for the presidency was motivated by a wish to avenge the perceived slights of that evening (Roberts, 2016). The speech was held in the second year of Obama's presidency when he was targeted by elements from the far-right, ranging from real estate developer and reality star Donald Trump to important news media outlets such as Fox News, who openly questioned whether Obama was born in the USA and as a consequence was a legitimate president. Taken together, this was called "the birther movement," a term serious enough to indicate that Obama's right to be president was contested on principled grounds. This is how Obama made fun of himself and his opponent(s) in 2011:

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<sup>4</sup> In the first years president Wilson was not present but his major spokesmen were. From 1921 onwards, with the new president Warren Harding, the dinner involved the president and since then only Ronald Reagan missed a dinner because he was recovering from an assassination attempt, in 1981; see <https://whca.press/news/annual-dinner/dinner-archive/>.

What a week. The state of Hawaii released my official, long form birth certificate. *[Audience shouting; cut to the back of Trump's head]*

Hopefully th... this puts all doubts to rest. But just in case there are any lingering questions, tonight I am prepared to go a step further.

*[Small laughter]*

Tonight, for the first time, I am releasing my official birth video.

*[Nods in confirmation as if serious; big audience laughs; cut to Donald Trump, who does not laugh and keeps on looking straight at Obama.]*

Now, I warn you...

*[Audience laughter]*

...no one has seen this material in fifty years, not even me. But, eh, let's take a look

*[A couple of seconds silence, Obama looks serious, frowns; then with a few cracks and bleeps, which suggest that this is old material, the movie starts.]*

*Wild savanna animals are rushing towards a certain place, in the light of a rising sun. In the lower left corner of the image, the date shows: '04 august. 1961, 7.45 PM.*

*A lion cub (for those familiar with Disney: Simba) is lying in a little crib. He is being anointed by the shaman, to then be shown to all animals, who simultaneously bow.*

*It now appears to be midday, clouded sky, with one ray of sun hitting the newborn child. The lion cub is held aloft for all to see.*

*[With bleeps and a crack the clip breaks off, as if it is a very short piece of found home footage; Obama remains serious, waits a couple of seconds.]*

Oh well. Back to square one.

*[Audience laughter]*

I..., I..., I... want to make clear to the Fox News table: that was a joke.

*[Big audience laughter]*

That was not my real birth video...

*[Remains looking serious]*

...that was a children's cartoon.

*[Big audience laughter]*

Call Disney, if you don't believe me. They have the original long form version.<sup>5</sup>

This is humorous and the humor works because Obama is acting dead serious: he is playing. Politically speaking, Obama is playing with three things at the same time. He is playing with his official birth certificate, with the constitutional framework defining the fundamentals of the American presidency, and with his political opponents. As for the first, he is playing with the fact that his official birth certificate had been disclosed by the state of Hawaii in the week preceding the dinner. This is why people could be wrong-footed or anxious to learn what Obama would show when announcing his official birth video. As for the second, in the Disney movie, the birth

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LZZzw1QTy1w>.

of Simba is a quasi-divine event, in the sense that the newly born is sacro-sanct: the legitimate son of the ruling king, officially anointed by a shaman. All the animals come to pay homage and the play with light in the movie is an intertextual reference to the birth of this other king: Jesus Christ. As these are familiar references to royalty in the Western tradition—hereditary, sacro-sanct, quasi-divine—they are also the opposite of what the American presidency stands for—which is why they play into the Fox News narrative according to which Obama was a despot. As for the third, Obama's play with his political opponents, Trump and Fox News, is based on their mediatized idea of political reality. He is playing with this by suggesting that the Disney clip is his real birth video, and by suggesting that his opponents cannot distinguish reality from fiction. This play, however, is not aimed at eliminating the opponent as if they were enemies. The play consists in a competition with the political opponents and a humorous invitation to the wider public to ask themselves whether Fox News is a reliable source of information.

In its skillful political use of humor, the Obama scene testifies to one type of political practice, a political game in which the players acknowledge that politics does not 'cover' the entirety of reality. Political playfulness realizes that the political play between different interests is ungrounded insofar as the actors involved know that they can never fully justify their claims. In Machiavelli's language, it is a matter of virtue and fortune, not of certainty, and it is a matter of the politician's skill in negotiating the tensions between the different interests and political actors involved. Can people get hurt in this game? For sure, just as soccer players may be seriously injured. To say, however, that Trump got out of the event 'traumatized,' as Maya Oppenheim (2017) noted in *The Independent*, suggests that this is the kind of political practice that Trump, as one who cannot live with ambiguity, is unable to engage with. In other words, Trump takes himself very seriously indeed. And that's not the only thing he is over-serious about. In fact, his entire approach to the playfulness that is integral to the political ethos is guided by the wish to destroy institutions, traditions (such as those guiding the transition between two administrations, or conceding electoral defeat), the separation of powers, rules of basic civility and decency, standards of public expression. To make light of all of them does not constitute political playfulness. Trump may be playing with these elements of the political game, but this is not in order to play at anything. Rather, it is in order to eradicate play and the play ethos. It is, in Machiavelli's language, an attempt to eradicate the precarity of his own power by disconnecting it from the realm of play.

The distinction between the player who plays *with* the rules (Trump in this case) and the player who plays *by* the rules (Obama), is central to Huizinga's seminal account of play—an account that Huizinga himself considered as a critique of fascism. As we noted earlier, for Huizinga there is a way of being too serious that looks like frivolity in the figure of the spoilsport. The spoilsport looks un-serious because she refuses to take the rules of the game seriously enough to play by them. But spoilsports are too serious because the grounds for their refusal is that the game is a mere game and is not justified by anything more fundamental. For Huizinga, "the spoilsport shatters the play world itself" (11). Spoilsports are, in Nietzsche's language, both nihilistic for rejecting the rules and projecting themselves in a world without rules, and ascetic for appealing to an imaginary fundamental ground for doing so.



It is this ambiguity whereby the spoilsport looks playful but in fact is over-serious, that has led many to mischaracterize Trump as a practitioner of political play. In our reading this is too quick: Trump represents an instance of political asceticism, which demands unquestionable respect on the one hand, or, on the other hand, strives towards the elimination of those who want to keep the game playfully alive.

In this context, it is telling that the likes of Trump and Fox News can make fun of opposite parties. They will do so, in the first instance, by following the logic captured in the Joker's catchphrase "Why so serious?" That is to say: ruling powers are accused of not being able to deal with a joke. Still, this is a cover-up for crime. There is nothing humorous about the Batman's Joker, nor does his phrase imply that politics is considered as play. On the contrary, the Joker's game is a play without seriousness, one that would turn into seriousness without play once in power. This is where politics proper turns into something else: any form of absolutism. So let us now turn to a normative account of politics that allows us to distinguish between what politics worthy of the name is and what is not.

## A Normative Distinction Between Politics and Politicking

If we stated above that Nietzsche worked towards a meta-ethics on the basis of play, we now need to explain how this relates to an ethics of political practice, and how this in turn can lead to a normative assessment of politics. Nietzsche's meta-ethics consisted in the fact that he did not ask how humans can act ethically in life but stated that life needs to be play first and foremost in order to even have a chance at being ethical. Following this premise, the way in which humans organize life on the basis of the distribution and execution of power—politics—should also be regarded as play. The genealogy of valuation implicit in the ontology of being as play implies that people's basic ability to assign value is grounded in their attachment to this play. All value-judgments are derived from this primary one, and all value-judgments answer to the question: Does this keep the play alive? Here, next to the distinction between politics and politicking, we come to the distinction between play and games, even if play is most often made visible in the phenomenon of games (and this is how we have used it above).

Games are different from play in two respects. Firstly, games are not ontological. This is to say: being is not organized as a series of discrete games, rather, being is play. Secondly, games involve thoughtlessness. They have boundaries beyond which all facts can be ignored, for the time of the game. This means that understanding politics in terms of a game rather than in terms of play is a dire mistake. It introduces thoughtlessness at the heart of politics. The result is the kind of nihilistic competition we see in corporate one-upmanship without any concern for social collateral damage or Arendt's proverbial banality of evil as thoughtlessness. Play, on the contrary, is not defined by what it excludes, but rather, by the fact that it resists foreclosure. Play maintains *Spielraum*. Politically speaking, this nevertheless involves rules: rules that define and limit the space of play.

The concrete implications of the chosen rules are unpredictable in principle: they depend on the chosen game. Just like games are built upon a strict separation between

the absolute and the relative, the resulting ethics is strict, not relativistic. This ethics satisfies and accounts for people's normative intuition by making restricted room for the absolute. In particular, it sets down a list of four minimal principles. First, this ethics requires that no judgment or value demands the overcoming of the game they arise from. Second, this ethics contains a warning against asceticism, here defined as the practice of judging games from a supposed non-game-like perspective. Third, this ethics requires consistency entirely directed at keeping play alive. Fourth, this ethics implies that exercising power, or participating in the institutional processes of campaigning, electing, negotiating, etc. counts as politicking, but not necessarily as politics. According to these four principles, Trump is not a politician; nor is Orbán, nor [insert here the name of any of the reader's favorite authoritarian leaders].

In closing, we should like to remind ourselves and the reader that Nietzsche's genealogy of morals is haunted by a dreadful possibility: that of the death of play in absolutism. This is an account that assumes there is a fragility at the heart of play; a fragility figured by the ambivalence of the rules. Winnicott talks about a "precariousness" of play related to its "magical" character. He writes: "the precariousness of play belongs to the fact that it is always on the theoretical line between the subjective and that which is objectively perceived" (1971: 68). He continues: "this is the precariousness in magic itself" (1971: 64). In the context of our discussion, this comes down to the acknowledgment that play is precarious and needs protection. This transforms a basic political attachment to play into a *responsibility* that implies the protection of play—to keep play alive. As with all ambiguous concepts, play can only die of determination. There are two such threats: the first is an excess of playfulness, which we call cheating. The other is an excess of seriousness, called asceticism. Between cheating and asceticism lies the *Spielraum* of the ethics of play, and of a politics worthy of the name. By implication, as we indicated, those who prefer cheating or asceticism will be politicking, but are not engaging in politics proper. They are not worthy of the name 'politicians'.

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