

Biography

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Abstract

Good character is easily confused with good behavior, a simple matter of following “the rules.” But good character is often a matter of breaking the rules, and following the rules is often a sign of bad character. Rules can threaten the development of character. At the same time, the development of character seems to require the use of rules. The paper suggests that in order to use rules safely, to develop rather than diminish character, we must be able to “play” with them.

Playhouses

Adam Smith

1. The Grumpy Old Man

A grumpy old man was annoyed by some children who came every day to play in the field behind his house. He thought of putting on his grumpiest face and yelling at them to leave. But he had tried that with others and it hadn't worked. So this time he decided to take a different approach. Calling them all to his back porch, he said, “It makes an old man very happy to see you having so much fun. In fact it makes me so happy that I'd like to give you a little reward. For bringing such joy to my weary life, I'll pay you each five dollars for every day you come here to play.” The children were delighted by their good fortune. They each took a five-dollar bill and said they would be back the next afternoon. This continued for a few days. Then the old man called them again to his porch and said, “Unfortunately I'm not a rich old man and my money is limited. From now on I'll only be able to pay each of you two dollars for playing here.” The children grumbled a bit but said they would still come back. The next day the old man noticed that they all seemed bit less exuberant, and that a few of them were missing. He let this continue for a few days, and then called the children back again to the porch. “It seems I'm out of money completely. I guess you'll have to play for free from now on.” At this they became very grumpy indeed, and went home

complaining. The next day no children showed up to play behind his house, and the old man sat on his porch with a smile on his face, reading his newspaper in peace.¹

2. A Clever Trick

It seems extrinsic incentives can supplant intrinsic motives. How does this happen?

At first the children were happy to play without the promise of a reward. If the old man had asked “what do you hope to get out of playing?” they might have been confused, since they played for the sake of playing. If the old man were a certain sort of philosopher he might have explained they did seek a “reward” for playing, and that the name for this reward was fun or “pleasure.” I suppose that is correct, so far as it goes. But if he had then told the children that all pleasures are the same and interchangeable; and that having money is also pleasurable; and that if they were rational they would see no reason not to trade their playtime for its monetary equivalent; and that since the pleasure of money is in the power it has to secure any other pleasures we desire, they may in fact have a good reason to make this exchange; and that actually it would be just fine if they chose to give up their playtime for the rest of their lives in exchange for fair compensation — well then we might hope that the children would have balked at the thought, and found good enough reasons to keep playing for its own sake, instead of for the sake of something else. We might hope the children would have wisely concluded that the philosopher had gotten unreasonable in his old age, and was a bit too rational for his own good.

But the old man was not a philosopher. He was too clever to make the exchange so explicit. He simply let the promise of reward work its magic. And so, distracted by a manufactured desire for something other than play itself, the children soon enough felt this desire become a need. Now they needed a reason to keep playing, where before such a need would have struck them as nonsense. When their new need for a reward went unmet, their motivation disappeared, and they

headed home, where they no doubt sit blinking at screens, collecting carefully pixelated rewards, and enriching the coffers at Google and Apple, where software engineers are more than fairly compensated for imagining new and better methods for the delivery of pleasure.

3. What does Play have to do with Character?

At the core of good “character” is the ability to do good for its own sake, and not for the sake of acquiring a reward or avoiding a punishment. In several traditions, this ability is called “virtue.” Virtue is not the ability to do good whether we like it or not. To be virtuous is not to be “well-behaved.” Rather, virtue depends on our capacity to enjoy what is good.ⁱⁱ

Often it seems hard for us to grasp the notion of “doing something for its own sake.” I think this is largely because the crude utilitarianism of that clever philosopher has become our culture’s common sense, and because we live in an almost completely marketized society, where things are valued only for their utility, and never for their use. But that is another argument for another day. The point for now is that we cannot understand the meaning of “character” unless we can understand what it is like to do something for its own sake.

There are many activities which can be done for their own sake. These include working (where we might distinguish “job” from “vocation”) and studying (where we might pursue “knowledge for its own sake”). Actually I suspect any and every activity can be done for its own sake, and that the ability to do anything for its own sake is the ability to be happy. But even if that is not the case, and that is only a mystic’s ambition, it is at least true that more of our lives than we allow might be spent in this way. Yet we do not allow for much of it. Most of us have jobs and not vocations; and most of us only study so we can get a better job. So we do not have many concrete examples through which to grasp this notion of doing something for its own sake.

Play, however, is familiar to us all — though it is increasingly unfamiliar to our screened-in kids. And a striking feature of play is that we play for the sake of playing, and that it would be strange to think otherwise about what we are doing when we play. So it is a good place to start.

But I want to go further and say something stronger about the connection between play and character. It is not just that play is an example of doing something for its own sake, and that character is the ability to do good for its own sake, and that the analogy is suggestive. Rather, play is the model for any activity pursued for its own sake. So when we are working because we enjoy it, our work is play. Of course most of us could not afford to work if we did not get paid. But we can still distinguish a vocation, which money enables us to do, from a job, which enables us to make money. Furthermore, what makes play the model is something distinctive about playing. What interests me is not the children’s games we conventionally call play, or even the adult activities we might still call by that name, such as sports and music, both of which we “play”. What interests me is the special attitude that is required in order to play at anything.

To take up this attitude is “what it is like” to play, whether we are literally playing or playing at work or studying playfully. My suggestion is that when we do something for its own sake, we must in a crucial sense be playing. To build good character — that human ability to do good which is fueled by the pleasure we take in it — we must practice this peculiar posture of mind.ⁱⁱⁱ

4. Play as an Attitude toward Rules

The posture of play involves a special attitude toward what I will call “rules.” By rules I have in mind several things, or several aspects of the thing called a rule, but here I want to focus on two of them. First, rules describe *incentives*. A rule is an if-then proposition or promise: *if* you do that, *then* this will happen to you, where “this” is either something we like (a reward) or dislike (a punishment). So the rule on this campus is that *if* you drink alcohol on the premises, *then* you will

get into trouble. Second, rules prescribe a *method*. A set of rules can be a series of steps toward a desired outcome: *if* you want this to happen, *then* you should follow these steps.

The connection between these two aspects of “rule” is fairly clear. “Rules” in the first sense can be combined as a set of “rules” in the second sense. A system of rewards and punishments can comprise a method for producing a desired result. Note that we can use this method in two ways. On the one hand, we can use it to lead *others* toward what is desired. This is one way of understanding “laws,” which are rules backed by legitimated force. We do not have to agree with the ancients that the right use of law is to “make people good” and develop their “character” in order to understand law in this way. Even if we are thoroughly modern and believe that the right use of law is only to secure peace, so that individuals can pursue their own notion of “good” without getting in each other’s way, we still have in mind a “desired outcome” (toleration, negative liberty, non-harm, etc). This is also how we tend to approach parenting, management, and education. We use a system of rewards and punishments to channel energies in desired ways.

On the other hand, we can use this same method to lead *ourselves* toward what is desired. For example, we can aim to build or break a certain habit, and we can use behavioral cues to accomplish this. These days we might call it “life-hacking,” and it is part of the growing conversation about “character building,” but it is certainly not a new idea. Again, we do not have to believe that our desired outcome is objectively desirable to understand “character” in this way. Even if we are sincere emotivists (possibly an oxymoron), we can still understand rules as a means to our desired end, and use them accordingly: which is to say, instrumentally.

In both cases the relevant point is that rules can only make use of what we already desire, our existing attractions and aversions. This limitation is significant in the following way. If a parent uses a child’s aversion to “quiet-time” to control the child’s behavior, she may succeed in

achieving her desired outcome (less noise). But may also succeed in deepening the child's aversion to quiet — and why should the child dislike quietude? “Eat your vegetables so you can have dessert” may be a good way to get kids to eat vegetables, but it is not a good way to get them to *enjoy* vegetables. But vegetables are good for us, and it is good for us to enjoy what is good for us. If a rule makes a good thing something to endure on the way to acquiring something else we happen to want (rather than what is good for us to want), the risk is that our capacity for taking pleasure in good things for their own sake will diminish. Generations might even grow up without any sense of what I am talking about, and it will no longer seem sensible to think of enjoying good things in this way. We will only be able to think in terms of simple pleasures to be consumed, and simple pains to be avoided (with a third category for “guilty pleasures,” which for the virtuous person is *definitely* an oxymoron). This will be our idea of a “happy life.”

We might conclude from this that rules cannot be used safely. But that conclusion would only follow if “enjoying what is good for us” were a “natural” process that, left to itself, would unfold without any teaching or experience or help from culture and tradition. This is not the case: we are not born enjoying what is good for us. Rather this is a natural capacity we can but must develop. With practice we can forge the link between subjective “desiring” and objective “desirability;” but it does take *practice*.^{iv} Perhaps this practice is never complete, but is rather a life's work, a matter of degree and never of perfection. The better conclusion is that rules can and must be part of this practice. The fact that we can make use of rewards and punishments to change our own habits of thought and feeling should alert us to this conclusion. So the question is how we can safely use rules to develop our character, not how to eliminate rules altogether so that our “authentic” character will be free to emerge. And I am suggesting that the way to use rules safely is to “play”

with them. The posture of a play is special attitude toward incentives, both the incentives we give ourselves and those given to us (or imposed) by others.

5. What is it Like to Play with Rules?

Notice first that while some “rules” as incentives (rewards or punishments) are given or imposed by people who promise to respond in certain ways to certain behavior, other rules are imposed by nature and are simple matters of cause and effect. So there are human rules and natural rules. The first kind is: if you do this, then *I* (or *we*) will do that. If you drink on campus, we will put you on probation. The other kind is: if you do this, then that will happen to you. If you drink a lot of alcohol, you will get drunk.

Johan Huizinga opens his study of *homo ludens* by observing that in the face of our common sense that we play for the sake of playing, scientists often explain play by observing its effects. Play seems to prepare us (and other animals, who also play) for future activities which are not play. So as children we “play house,” and then as adults we make homes, which protect our children; just as puppies play at fighting, which prepares them to win their fights, and so to pass their genes along to their puppies; and so on. But this reference to side effects does not actually explain play. Rather it explains play away. It reduces play to something else, because it excludes the player’s experience of playing. The key point is this: we do not have “side effects” in mind when we play. Effects are not intentions, and to intend an effect is often to diminish it.

Yet we humans are also *homo sapiens*, wielding foresight. Observations of cause and effect reveal the natural rules that govern us, and extend our powers of foresight. Knowing the rules in more detail, we can improve our calculations, and make better use of the rules. Understanding each of our actions as causes connected to effects which we may or may not desire, we can better achieve

desired outcomes, both individually and collectively. So, having learned from science that play prepares kids for success, we might prescribe more playtime.

The question is how to use our (ever-increasing) knowledge of the natural rules of cause and effect without ruining the effect of the cause. One popular answer is to romanticize ignorance and praise the “noble savage” who is “authentic” because she has not been corrupted by “progress in the arts and sciences” (Rousseau, in his less careful moments). I find this answer unsatisfying, if only because it is irrelevant (which Rousseau recognized, in his more careful moments). There is no unknowing what is known, nor should we wish for that sort of innocence. If we could not think instrumentally, we could not take care for the future or pursue any projects or bind ourselves with promises. We could not work together toward common goals.

The better approach is the more difficult to describe: it is what I am trying to capture by suggesting that we must be able to “play with” the rules. This suggestion now becomes more precise: we must be able to play with our *knowledge* of the rules. We are trying to preserve the player’s experience of play from her knowledge of play’s effects, knowledge which has its own effects on play. And now we can consider what is central to child’s play: the ability to “pretend.”

Every child knows perfectly well that he is ‘only pretending, or that it was ‘only for fun.’ How deep-seated this awareness is in the child’s soul is strikingly illustrated by the following story . . . [A father] found his four-year-old son sitting at the front of a row of chairs, playing ‘trains.’ As he hugged him the boy said: ‘Don’t kiss the engine, Daddy, or the carriages won’t think it’s real. This ‘only pretending’ quality of play betrays a consciousness of the inferiority of play compared with ‘seriousness,’ a feeling that seems to be something as primary as play itself. Nevertheless . . . the consciousness of play being ‘only a pretend’ does not by any means prevent it from proceeding with the utmost seriousness, with an absorption, a devotion that passes into rapture and, temporarily at least, completely abolishes the troublesome ‘only’ feeling. The contrast between play and seriousness is always fluid.

In the same breath, Huizinga stresses “the *disinterestedness* of play. Not being ‘ordinary life’ it stands outside the immediate satisfaction of wants and appetites, indeed it interrupts the appetitive process.”^v While Huizinga simply includes pretense and disinterest as two items in a list of play’s

features, I offer the stronger claim that our ability to pretend is prerequisite to our capacity for disinterest — our capacity to do and enjoy something for its own sake.

6. Internal and External Goods; Practical and Technical Knowledge

Consider two classic arguments. One is Alasdair MacIntyre's distinction between "external" and "internal" goods.^{vi} The other is Michael Oakshott's distinction between "technical" and "practical" knowledge.^{vii}

To get at MacIntyre's distinction, think of what it is like to play a sport, such as soccer. Soccer has many rules, which settle the size of the field and the shape of the ball, determine how the ball can be moved down the field, and distribute points (our "goals") and penalties (which hinder us from achieving our goals). We play soccer by following these rules. You could break the rules and win the game by carrying the ball in your arms to the net; but then you would not be playing soccer, and you would have "won" a different game. Soccer is what MacIntyre calls a "practice": a set of rules followed for the sake of a good which is "internal" to the practice.

The good, in one sense, is to win the game. We play to win: that is our goal, our "end." But consider that in many cases there are rewards for winning, such as money and prestige. These are "external" goods. On the one hand, external goods might motivate players to play their best. On the other hand, it is possible to achieve external goods *without* pursuing internal goods. We call this "cheating," and we take it seriously, even though the game is "just a game." A boxer can throw a fight so a gambler can profit and give him a cut. So the presence of external goods can undermine a practice, as the old man discovered.

However — and this is crucial — their vitiating effects can be more subtle than this. Note that besides the rules of the game, there are usually rules that punish cheating. But if your reason for not cheating is your fear of punishment — if your fear is what is present to your mind — you are

still failing to play for the sake of the internal good. You are pursuing another external good, which is to avoid being punished.

To get at Oakshott's distinction, think of what it is like to play a musical instrument, such as the piano. There is a method for playing, consisting of many rules that tell the player how to sit at the bench, how to position the fingers, and so on. There are rules for notation, so that the pianist knows which notes to play, when, and for how long. And there are rules that help players to master these rules, such as how long to spend practicing each day, how to progress to more challenging material, and so on. There are also social rules that govern performing and listening.

All of these rules can be written down and followed as method. To know these rules is to have "technical" knowledge. But no one will be surprised to discover that it is possible to follow all the rules to the letter and be a bad pianist. It is also possible (and usually necessary) to break the rules and be a great pianist. There are things you must know in order to play well that cannot be captured by method. Here we start to talk about *experience*. One must learn how, over time, and with a teacher who has herself learned from experience, *how* to follow and then to break the rules in the right way, in order to play the piano well. This is "practical" knowledge.

Technical and practical knowledge are not mutually exclusive; the distinction is between two kinds of knowledge that can work together. The question is about how they are related. Usually, you start at the piano by "methodically" following the rules. You are *thinking through* the rules, explicitly. The rules are literally in your mind while you are following them. So when you first learn to read notation, you must laboriously match each mark on the page to each key on the instrument. Once you can do this, you have technical knowledge.

When you have learned how to read notation, so that you no longer have to *think through* the rules about how to read music while you are actually reading the music, then you have something

like practical knowledge of the musical language. However — and this is crucial — it is always possible to recall the rules to mind. If you do this while you are playing, you will invariably lose your place, and make mistakes. Your mind was occupied with playing the music: now, in a sudden failure, it is preoccupied with following the rules for playing music.

More precisely, it is preoccupied with your fear of what will happen if you fail to follow the rules: you will make a mistake and be embarrassed. You had to acquire technical knowledge in order to acquire practical knowledge. But, once you have practical knowledge, technical knowledge can become a hindrance to practically knowledgable action — to playing well. Practical knowledge, reduced to technical knowledge, can fail to produce the right kind of practice. So we cannot reduce practical to technical knowledge without consequences for our practice. Sometimes the reduction helps us to act well, as when the beginner concentrates on the rules in order to be able some day to forget them. Sometimes the reduction keeps us from acting well, as when the experienced pianist gets distracted by the rules, and momentarily forgets how to play.

MacIntyre's distinction helps us understand what it is like to play with rules understood as incentives; Oakeshott helps us understand what it is like to play with rules understood as methods. Neither is an argument that incentives and methods should or could be eliminated, or that players should or can be kept "innocent" of external goods and technical methods, so that their motives are pure and their performance authentic. To pretend is not to be unaware that one is pretending (that is something else: "false consciousness"). To pretend is to redirect our attention from one aspect of our situation to another. We hold our external perspective in abeyance, in order to inhabit our internal one. We absorb ourselves in the practice, by letting go the distractions of "what for" and "what will happen" and "how do I make it happen."

The attitude of play is a matter of attention. Speaking of education, Simone Weil says:

Students must therefore work without any wish to gain good marks, to pass examinations, to win school successes; without any reference to their natural abilities and tastes; applying themselves equally to all their tasks, with the idea that each one will help to form in them the habit of that attention which is the substance of prayer. When we set out to do a piece of work, it is necessary to wish to do it correctly, because such a wish is indispensable if there is to be true effort. Underlying this immediate objective, however, our deep purpose should aim solely at increasing the power of attention with a view to prayer; as, when we write, we draw the shape of the letter on paper, not with a view to the shape, but with a view to the idea we want to express. To make this the sole and exclusive purpose of our studies is the first condition to be observed if we are to put them to the right use.^{viii}

To put our activities to “right use” is for Weil to forget their “utility.” She uses religious language, likening this posture of mind to the attitude of prayer, or describing it as training for prayer itself. She captures very precisely what in my telling it is like to “play” — but in her telling it does not sound very playful. It sounds serious. Hers is the sensibility of a prodigy and a mystic, one who has always known *how* to “make this the sole and exclusive purpose.” She is a master of disinterest and has been since her childhood. Most of the students she is addressing are not, either because most people naturally lack this talent, or because most people have been trained since *their* childhoods to think in terms of rewards and punishments and methods for securing or avoiding them. And most people spend most of their lives in institutions which depend for their survival on rules which structure time and coordinate action and provide accountability. We could not pursue common goods outside of these institutional contexts.

The question, then, is practical. Since we cannot do without rules; and since most people already think in terms of rules (“if I do this, then I will get what I want”), and find it confusing to be told that the goal is simply to want what is good “for its own sake” (a goal that will often require us to *change* what we want); how then can we create the kinds of rules that actually lend themselves to play (or prayer, if you like) — rules that fade into the background and remain context, and do not insist on being the text? Rules that guard our attention instead of taking it?

I think that is the broader question of ethics. But I am interested here in this more specific question: how can we create educational institutions that promote not just our capacity to love

learning for its own sake, and not for the sake of grades; but to love the good for its own sake, and not just for the sake of the rewards we get for being a person of “good character?” How can we create contexts for learning that build character instead of making character unnecessary?

7. Play and Character Education

At this university we have made character a priority. We have the Wendt Center, our host, which offers character scholarships and promotes the inclusion of character education in our curricula. We also have a series of required courses called “worldview,” in which character is an explicit theme. I serve as a mentor with the Wendt Center, and I have taught the worldview courses. Last semester I taught a section of the first-year worldview course. It involves several plenary sessions where all the sections meet together. One of these sessions was devoted to the theme of “integrity” as a key trait of good character. Part of the session was led by a student improv club. They performed skits that were supposed to show what “integrity” is. In each skit a student was faced with a moral decision. For example, one might suggest to another that they get fake IDs so they can go to a bar. Or one might tempt another to help him cheat on a test. In every single scenario, the right action was explained as obedience to a rule, and the motive for following this rule was identified as an external good, usually the avoidance of punishment.

The point of my argument is that this is exactly what integrity is not. Good character cannot be explained as obedience to rules in light of consequences. This should be obvious, since most of our ethical exemplars are people whose character gave them the courage to break bad moral rules and suffer consequences that were often far worse than whatever wrist-slaps accompany the use of a fake ID. And our best examples of bad character are often people who follow bad moral rules, whether from fear or for favor, because they want to be (seen as) good people. Integrity just as often means breaking rules as it means following them; and in neither case can integrity be reduced

to the breaking or following of rules, which are always incidental to a person of true integrity. Of course no bad moral rule is ever advertised as such, and the greatest injustices are always done in the name of justice, by which most of us feel conveniently obliged. So good character will sometimes mean refusing to fulfill what others sincerely believe are our moral obligations. Just think of the Civil Rights Movement.

This complicates things (and this complexity is what makes many students cling to that easy but brittle relativism which obliges us to deny all obligations, except perhaps for those to which we “consent”). It makes it hard to be certain about what integrity means and what it requires in particular situations. But an appreciation for this complexity, and a patience with the difficulty of appreciating it, is one of the qualities that character education is supposed to develop. A person with good character is allergic not only to vice but to moralism, which strains to reduce the vivid colors of ethical life to a black-and-white world of codified rules that make virtue a measurable quality. As Mencius said: is not the openly unjust person (always a rare breed) but the “village honest man” who is the real “enemy of virtue.”

Perhaps the external good most insidiously and easily confused with the internal good of the pursuit of good character is *approbation*. This greatly increases the complexity we must be able to appreciate and navigate. It also helps make my notion of a “rule” more concrete. For a “rule” only really means anything when it gets inside us and shapes our responses to situations. The law is just a piece of paper, if it is not written on the hearts of the people. And nothing lodges more deeply in human hearts than the desire for that special reward called “approval.”

In high school I was enrolled in an online history class with one other student. We did our work in the principle’s office, for some reason. His computer was right in front of us; it was easy enough to go in and manipulate the records so that the system said we had done work that we had not, or

that we had gotten better grades than we did. My friend talked me into cheating, and I went along. (And he introduced an unspoken rule into the situation: “if you don’t cheat with me, I won’t like as you much.”) We could have gotten away with it. But eventually I started feeling guilty, and I decided to confess. The principle was grave and upset but also said that he admired me for doing the right thing when I didn’t have to.

You might suppose that I displayed “integrity” in this situation. In one sense I did, but — it’s complicated. First of all, it is possible to feel guilt for things that we should not feel guilty about. Guilt by itself cannot be a sure-fire guide to virtue. In this case it was surely appropriate for me to feel guilt; but the desire to avoid the feeling of guilt cannot by itself be trustworthy, for others can use this desire and impose a rule: don’t do this, or you’ll feel guilty about it. And that desire to avoid an unpleasant feeling called “guilt” can in other situations interfere with our capacity to do good for its own sake. If we are in the habit of doing good for the sake of not feeling guilty about doing bad, then we will get in the habit of responding to our fear of feeling guilty, and that habit can lead us astray when the feeling arises. For sometimes we will have to do what is right even though we feel guilty about it. Second, knowing the principle’s personality, I anticipated that he would praise me for doing the “hard thing,” and this surely colored my decision to confess. So the promise of a reward — praise for responding rightly to my feeling of guilt, and for rightly feeling guilty — got mixed up in my decision about what to do in this situation. Just as the promise of my friend’s approbation had gotten me into the situation in the first place.

Nevertheless, I believe I did the right thing. Here, I suggest, is where the concept of “play” comes into play (so to speak). Some people (often following, if not misreading, Kant) have concluded from dwelling on these kinds of situations that only “purity of heart,” the absence of mixed motives, “a good will alone,” can capture the essence of good character. But that is deeply

unrealistic and, I would suggest, inhuman. If we demand purity of heart in order to approve of any action — if we insist that action is only good if it proceeds from an attention which is so pure we remain blind to every external good — then either we will never act, or we will never be able to call any action “good.” The notion of “character,” which is more complex than the notion of “action,” can help us to get over this obsession, which I think is part of what leads to moralism (if we demand moral purity, then we will be very, very interested in getting the rules for action “just right” — a hopeless task, since the obsession with rules is part of the problem).

What we can do is to “play” with our knowledge of the external goods, including the deeply insinuated but still external good of others’ approbations. It will do us no good to *deny* that these external goods are present, that we are attracted by them, and that they enter into our calculations. That will have the obverse effect of making us obsessed with the external goods (don’t think of an elephant!) and we will become either furious rebels or dogmatic conformists: both equally guilty of taking the rules too seriously. Rather, we must be able to *pretend* that they are not present, in Huizinga’s sense of “pretend.” We must take up an attitude toward those external goods which allows us to use them (instead of being used *by* them) to aid our pursuit of the internal goods, which we aim to enjoy for their own sake. Incentives and methods are most useful when they are forgotten, in the spirit of play, when we are absorbed in what we are doing, bracketing the *how* and the *what-for*. And they can best be forgotten when they are forgettable.

8. Jigs

Matthew Crawford describes a “jig” as

a device or procedure that guides a repeated action by constraining the environment in such a way as to make the action go smoothly, the same each time, without his having to think about it . . . A physical jig reduces the physical degrees of freedom a person must contend with. By seeding the environment with attention-getting objects (such as a knife left in a certain spot) or arranging the environment to keep attention away from something (as, for example, when a dieter keeps certain foods out of easy view), a person can informationally jig it to constrain his mental degrees of freedom. The upshot is that to keep action on track, according to some guiding purpose, one has to

keep attention properly directed. To do this, it helps a great deal to arrange the environment accordingly, and in fact this is what is generally done by someone engaged in a skilled activity.

Commenting on Crawford, Alan Jacobs further explains that “[t]o make a jig, then, is to offload or automate forms of attention that do not reward investment; it is to say that I want to invest my attention here, not there, because it is here where I hope to find my reward.”^{ix}

This is a good way to start thinking about what it means to create contexts in which a set external goods, acting as constraints (“rules”) are experienced as forms of freedom, because they free people to pursue internal goods. But the design of these contexts will make all the difference, because if the point is to “keep attention properly directed,” we will miss the point if the jig becomes the focus, and we start looking for our reward in conformity to the constraint.

A grade on an assignment is a kind of jig. It can protect a student from the distractions that might interfere with her learning, by focusing her attention on the work she must do to learn. “I will not go out tonight, because I need to do well on tomorrow’s test.” But if while she is studying her attention is consumed by her concerns about grades, she will of course have that much less attention to offer the material itself. If she nevertheless earns the ‘A’ that she craves, she will have still failed to learn from her experience what it might be like to enjoy learning for its own sake. Instead of building a new and better desire, will have earned her ‘A’ by the sheer force of a will constrained by — under the *strain* of — her existing desire for good grades.

Most of our world is a set of very bad jigs. A bad jig is a vicious cycle, since it produces people who have been kept from experiencing “what it is like” to do something for its own sake, and these people go on to design new jigs that even more efficiently train other people’s attention to focus on external goods. There is now a lot of enthusiasm for “gamification,” which can turn any of MacIntyre’s “practices” into games. For example, gamification can be used by insurance companies to get people to exercise by offering points and power-ups and merit badges and the

like. This is a typical confusion about ethical reasoning. Of course it is a “good” thing to exercise. If a point system can incentivize people to do this good thing, how could that be a “bad” thing? Well, because it is a sign that things are very bad indeed when a human being takes more pleasure in seeing numbers on a screen than in moving his or her body. Children take disinterested pleasure in movement; they do not normally need “rewards” for moving their bodies. But children become adults. If we have come to a situation where adults need rewards, then perhaps we can make careful use of rewards. But the need for rewards is the problem, not the “solution.”

This sort of solutionism is reaching dystopian extremes.

Imagine a world where many of your daily activities were constantly monitored and evaluated: what you buy at the shops and online; where you are at any given time; who your friends are and how you interact with them; how many hours you spend watching content or playing video games; and what bills and taxes you pay (or not). It's not hard to picture, because most of that already happens, thanks to all those data-collecting behemoths like Google, Facebook and Instagram or health-tracking apps such as Fitbit. But now imagine a system where all these behaviours are rated as either positive or negative and distilled into a single number, according to rules set by the government. That would create your Citizen Score and it would tell everyone whether or not you were trustworthy. Plus, your rating would be publicly ranked against that of the entire population and used to determine your eligibility for a mortgage or a job, where your children can go to school - or even just your chances of getting a date.^x

That is the world envisioned by the government of China, which is currently developing a “social credit rating system” for its citizens. Of course those billion-plus people will hardly resemble “citizens,” if we understand that concept in anything but Orwellian terms. The quest for a perfect citizen score might make a good “game,” but it is not a game that sounds fun to play. One imagines the gamifiers reading the latest research on the health benefits of playing games with friends, and creating a game that awards points for playing games with friends, points which can then be translated into discounts on insurance premiums. This will assure our insurers that we are not wasting our leisure time on anything so unprofitable as leisure.

Perhaps it is not (yet) so explicit for many of our students, but it is still true that most of them have been trained since birth by a series of bad jigs: institutional and cultural contexts that promote

good behavior but not good character. The student skits about integrity might suggest that if our goal here is not to help our students behave, get good grades, and land a well-paying job, but to build good *character*, then at some point along the way we have failed them. And I do think it is an indication that we have more work to do. But our work as an educational institution takes place in a larger context of homes, workplaces, political institutions, and online platforms that have already trained our students to attend almost exclusively to incentives and methods, which is to say their contexts have trained their attention on their existing desires, and distracted them from the possibility that their desires might change — that they might be happier if their pleasures ran deeper than that momentary hit of dopamine (“Dopamine Labs” is the actual name of a software engineering company, which promises to make a clients’ apps at least 10% more addictive than they already are). In better contexts, students might have encountered a kind of happiness which is more than “the moment before you need some more happiness,” as (m)ad man Don Draper put it.^{xi}

What can be done? With increasing pressure on higher education to spend less time promoting the liberal art of loving the good (and the good of learning in particular) for its own sake, and more time being “useful,” how can we make our institutions truly useful to our students, and not just to our economy? How can we make them spaces where our students can play, when our students seem increasingly unfamiliar with what it is like to play *even in the colloquial sense of childhood*, let alone in the more expanded sense I have developed here?

In closing I will offer a few broad suggestions, but this is intended mainly as an open question. If the larger context were not so hostile to play, it might be easier to imagine ways to make our own context more amenable to it. As it is, we may have to put on some other hats, in order deal with these bigger issues. We can think as creatively as we like about how to revive the liberal arts

as a context for character education. But if our students are staring at sixty thousand dollars in student debt, and entering a job market where by 2020 at least forty percent of workers will be “independent contractors” surviving on short-term gigs without secure benefits or pensions or regular schedules; if more than half of our faculty are those independent contractors called adjuncts, whose “independence” often qualifies them for food stamps; if public funding for education is cut and cut and cut some more; well, it will be hard to tell our students (or even their teachers) that they should take time to “play” and forget about the *how* and the *what-for*.

9. Suggestions

One general principle for using rules to encourage a playful relation to rules is that rules should not be too many or too detailed, and that a few general principles are better than a lot of specific rules. Of course there is no rule for how many rules is too many, or how much detail is too much. So we will have to play around with it. The reason for this principle is that if rules can distract us from their purpose and capture our attention, so that we come to think of following the rule as the end instead of the means to the end, then more rules will be more distracting. A proliferation of rules can scatter our attention, distracting us with minutia and inclining us to think that the letter matters more than the spirit. It also inclines us to think it is possible to cover every situation with a rule, which makes us feel frustrated when situations arise that are not covered by rules. There is often a ricochet between those moralists who demand more rules to make sure there is no ambiguity in any situation, and those rebels who resent the moralists’ obsession with the letter of the law, but use that otherwise appropriate resentment to justify gleeful violations of the law’s spirit. (This describes a lot of our “debates” about political correctness.)

For example, we may wish to make some campus rules about the consumption of alcohol. One reason for making these rules is that the overuse of alcohol might make it harder to pursue the

internal goods of our practices. So we want to protect our students from this distraction. At the same time, the making of wine and the brewing of beer and the distilling of spirits is a practice that aims at the internal good of fine wine and good beer and excellent spirits, and the drinking of these things is also a practice that aims at the internal good of enjoyment. We might want to encourage the appreciation of good alcohol, because we think that is good, and discourage the depreciation of alcohol by its (ab)use as a means to the external “good” of drunkenness, which we may believe is in many contexts not good at all (and we will offer reasons for that belief, such as the evils of addiction, sexual assault, poor health, and the like). If we make too many rules about the consumption of alcohol, or make them too detailed, we will distract ourselves from the point, which is to enjoy alcohol well, and we will make it harder rather than easier to enjoy it. If we make a general principle that says “do not abuse alcohol,” and acknowledge that the meaning of this principle will come from *judgment*, then we will be able to hold people accountable for their judgments (by asking them for their reasons, treating them as fellow judges), rather than simply holding them accountable for whether they followed the rules (which is eventually just an exercise of power).

Another general principle is that the rules that govern us as a group should promote our capacity to craft the rules that govern us as a group, and our capacity to govern ourselves as individuals. Rules should “empower” us. Empowerment is a popular idea, but it needs to be carefully defined. I say that to be empowered is to be *freed from the felt need for power*. By “power” I mean the power to get what we happen to want; to be freed from the felt need for power is to gain enough distance from our existing desires that we can play with them — question them, experiment with them, and reshape them, should we discover that those desires are not good for us to have — so that we can discover new and better desires. To be empowered in this way is to

gain some freedom from the *press* of desires, the alternately dull and desperate sense that if they are not satisfied it will be a very big deal. Usually it is only by gaining some freedom from the press of existing desires that we can stand back and notice the sources of these desires — how they are often manufactured for us by peers, media, advertising, and the like.

Probably the main venue for empowerment in higher education is the classroom itself, where the professor can do many things to cultivate this sense of space, where we can for a little while “stand outside the immediate satisfaction of wants and appetites,” such as the desire to impress our peers, the fear of being embarrassed by a mistake, the plodding obsession with scores and GPAs, and the literal distraction of the smartphone. The professor can *show* students by her example “what it is like” to play with ideas, which is so different from passing a test about them; what it is like to have a real conversation, where there are no learning outcomes; and in general what it is like to be driven not by grim determination but by joy and passion.

Notice that this does not mean that rules themselves should define or enforce new and better desires. It is not about telling people that they must not want this, and that instead they must want that. The whole point of “play” is that we must be able to *enjoy* what is good for us. But that fusion must be gradual and can never be forced. It is a matter of creating space where it can happen. I basically want us all to have more fun doing whatever we are doing, on the assumption that whatever “fun” we might have when doing what is bad for us is not genuine fun at all, but is rather a shallow pleasure that is distracting us from a deeper one. (Think of our current president, who has a lot of “fun” and is always “just kidding.”) The point is that it never works to say “you’ll have fun and you’ll like it!”

A final general principle, and the one which must be most carefully handled, is that rules should be set up to distribute *honor* for excellent play, for excellence in practice, excellence in the pursuit

of internal goods. Where the practice is the whole of life, which is the pursuit of character, this means that rules should honor good character. One reason this must be carefully handled is that honor can be given for doing what is wrong. I pointed to this earlier, in my discussion of approbation. The danger here is not just that people will be honored for doing bad things, but that because they are honored for it — and because they are motivated by the promise of honor, or by the fear of dishonor — they will sincerely confuse the bad with the good, and they will see the bad action as their moral duty. We need only think of honor killings to see the point.

As I have argued, the point is to love the good for its own sake, which means that honor finally remains an external good. We should do what is good whether we are honored for it or not. And, if we live in a culture where the good is not honored, we will often have to do so. But the reason that honor can still be a usable rule is that, when it is properly tied to an internal good, it *cannot* be achieved by any means other than the pursuit of this good. You may win the prize for the chess match by cheating, but you will not win *honor* for winning, because you cheated, and cheating is dishonorable.

Honor is also based on the free judgment of others about whether you have followed the spirit of the law, and not whether you have followed the letter. To be honored is not to have your action matched up with a “measure” of “accountability” which provides the illusion of certainty because it has been written down. To be honored is to be recognized by your teachers and peers; it is a human judgment that takes into account too many details to be codified in rules.

So we might want to think about how to create more of an honor culture on our campuses. We even might be able to incorporate honor systems into our syllabi. Recently I have experimented with this in some of my courses, by making a percentage of my students’ grade contingent on whether they finish reading a novel, outside of class, by the end of the semester. There is no test

or book report: they are “on their honor” to report honestly that they have finished the book or not. I use this assignment to illustrate a point about integrity, a point I develop explicitly in my lectures. There is of course the risk that students will take advantage of the honor system to win the points without earning them. But the presence of that risk allows me to address it, and to explain that the risk *they* take in doing so is that they will dishonor themselves. And what must be emphasized again and again is that while we do not usually notice it, there is just as much of a risk in our usual ways of grading. If some students will dishonor themselves by lying about reading their novels, other students may gain a glimpse of what it would be like to read novels for sheer pleasure, having been given just a little bit of freedom from the usual press of distracting incentives for doing what they might otherwise be able to enjoy for its own sake.

I hope we can keep playing with these ideas.

ⁱ I have found versions of this story scattered all over the Internet; I have not been able to locate its original source.

ⁱⁱ As in Aristotle, for example. “[A] man who abstains from [excessive] bodily pleasures and enjoys doing so is temperate, but a man who is oppressed by doing so is intemperate . . . Thus ethical virtue is concerned with pleasures and pains . . . In view of this, we should be brought up from our early youth in such a way as to enjoy and be pained by the things we should . . .” *Nicomachean Ethics*, (Springer, 2013), 24.

ⁱⁱⁱ I borrow this phrase (“posture of mind”) from Annette Baire’s *Postures of the Mind: Essays on Mind and Morals* (University of Minnesota, 1985).

^{iv} A practice in which “subjective desires” can certainly be seen to supply the necessary starting point — the proper material for the work, rather than something execrable. One can turn here to John Dewey’s ethics, and specifically to his distinction between valuing and valuation. As Gregory Pappas puts it, for Dewey, “valuation arises because valuing turns problematic . . . once doubt arises, valuing judgments provide the initial material for deliberation.” See Pappas, *John Dewey’s Ethics: Democracy as Experience* (Indiana University Press, 2008), 111.

^v Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (Routledge, 2002), 9-10.

^{vi} See Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, 1984), especially Chapter 14.

^{vii} See Michael Oakshott, “Rationalism in politics,” in *Rationalism in politics and other essays* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1991).

^{viii} Simone Weil, “Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies,” in *Waiting for God* (Orbis Books, 1998), 93.

^{ix} Matthew Crawford, *The World Beyond Your Head* (Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 2015), 31, 33. Quoted in Alan Jacobs, “Attending to Technology: Theses for Disputation,” in *New Atlantis* (Winter 2016), 19.

^x Rachel Botsman, “Big Data meets Big Brother as China moves to rate its citizens,” in *Wired* (October 21, 2017).

^{xi} In Season 5, Episode 12 of *Mad Men*.