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## Sixteen fragments on friendship and play

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Friendship and play are luxuries squandered on children.

Loki (apocryphal)

### I.

In one retelling of creation, God creates humans not once, but twice. In the first story of creation, these humans (both male and female) are said to be conjured in God's image. They are told to fill the earth and subdue it. In contrast, having finished His work, God rests. In the second story of creation, God forms man from dust and breathes life into what He fashions. Later, God subdivides His creation to save the man from being alone. The two humans are thus both a part of each other, but separate from one another: 'bone of my bones and *flesh of my flesh*'. They are an excess or luxury in an otherwise economic and purposeful system. Everything is in its place and nothing could be elsewhere. There is divine order. Childlike and innocent, these second humans are left to be together and to play in the Garden. We all know they were heading for a fall – there is trickery in the Garden . . .

### II.

In one of the stories about the beginning, the fruit of two trees are forbidden to the humans: 'the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil'. The serpent 'more crafty than any beast of the field' isn't lying when it speaks about the nature of the fruit of the first tree. Having eaten from it, the humans are banished lest they eat from the second tree that would give them immortality. God can bear no equals – and He sets a hierarchy between himself and humans, and between the man and woman.

After the Garden, humans are thrown back on to each other. Friendship with God does not seem possible. God is unitary and complete; the humans are multiple and forever unfinished. No longer childlike and innocent, they are to toil and suffer. They are left to contemplate each other and their own lack of purpose and necessity (it is their pathway to friendship and play).

### III.

Abraham is an exceptional human being as he is said to be the friend of God. Outside of monotheism, humans find themselves as both the playthings and the playmates of the gods. Friendship is found in invention, transgression, trickery, and treachery. It is found in the interplay of humans and gods, and every creature and being both mythical and mundane. Such a world is open and dynamic. It is a woven patchwork of disparate pieces and contradictions (ontologically, spatially, temporally). In such a world that is both unfinished and unfinishable, friendship and play, in all their myriad varieties, can flourish.

### IV.

Exposing humans as the murderers of God, Nietzsche's Madman exhorts us to contemplate the sacred games we shall have to invent to be worthy of the deed. He asks whether we shall have to become gods even to seem worthy of the deed. The crime precipitates nihilism: this condition is kaleidoscopic. Once again humans are free to play; humans are free to forge new forms of

friendship. It suggests a possibility for possibility – new ways of being, new ways of creating, new joys and pleasures. Such a world is open and dynamic (it is beyond good and evil). Yet Nietzsche cannot resist hanging his thought on the scaffolding of hierarchy. For him there is no escape from the harsh sounding truth of subordination. It would seem that there are multiple Nietzsches too.

#### V.

The trickster reoccurs in many myths and legends. Liminal and mercurial, the trickster is essentially transgressive: a challenger and subverter of order, but also the inventor or facilitator of something new. Born liars and shape-shifters, we know all too well that they are not what they are. Yet, is it not to this uncanny figure that we are so often drawn? Why are we so fond of the one who we know to trick and squander, to play with reality, and to fabricate? A question to ask your *doppelgänger*, perhaps.

#### VI.

The trickster suggests questions about truth and reality. In this way, the shadow of the trickster falls over friendship and play – in what sense are they true or real? This is not a question of deception (we are always deceived in the end), nor is it question of authenticity (there is no original to provide a model). The truth and reality of each friendship is that it breaks from any model or ideal. The truth of friendship is remaining genuine to the fact that friendship serves no purpose and cannot be finished – even less so the friends. At the heart of friendship the element of play is always retained. Play is not in opposition to, nor is it a different dimension of, reality. Play is a movement in all aspects of reality, it is a shifting of shapes, an attempt not only to rearrange but – possibly – to create something new. In this way it is not the trickster who is brought into question and exposed by reality; it is reality that is brought into question and exposed by the trickster.

#### VII.

Bataille claims that the true problem of general economy is not that of production and accumulation, but expenditure. This expenditure – a thing of great value given up to pure and destructive loss – becomes an excess in the many senses that the word in English implies: a surplus, a luxury, an outrage. Thus, we fail to understand if we think the problem of economy is one of holding onto what we have – the problem is finding a way of giving it away. For Bataille, the central problem of general economy is therefore the problem of how to squander. Therein lays the economy of friendship and play.

#### VIII.

Foucault's thought suggests a connection between BDSM and friendship. The connection is subtle. Bound together here are the themes of power and play. In English-speaking BDSM subcultures, 'play' is the excessive, superfluous, luxurious acts of BDSM itself. This play is that squander identified by Bataille as being 'non-productive expenditure' and 'perverse sexual activity (i.e. deflected from genital finality)'. It offers up the body, the emotions, and the imagination not for some purpose – but to free abandon and *jouissance*.

#### IX.

In BDSM 'play' can be said to have a double meaning: expenditure and game. As Foucault notes – everyone involved knows BDSM is a game. If we don't know this, then the play is not play. Nevertheless, a game about what, and between whom? Despite appearances, play is not a game of power, but a game about power. Not a game which sees power imitated and reiterated, but a game which sees power innovated, inverted (and perhaps enervated). BDSM is not a politics of power where all is infused with hierarchy; BDSM is not the communion of lovers who in seeking to form a singular 'we' work against their own multiplicity; BDSM maintains fidelity to distance, openness, and multiplicity. It is through such play that we become friends.

#### X.

For Foucault power is productive; it is also connected to pleasure. The sadist and dominant know this to be their truth. Their play is precisely about giving free reign to this pleasure. Their play is connected to the overcoming of inhibition within their own self, and within the selves of others. Their play is about the impulse to yield; but at the right time, and in the right way. Yet Foucault's

connection also suggests another aspect of this form of play: the pleasure of being subject, the pleasure of being restricted, bound, bruised, and dominated. It suggests the pleasure of being in the grip of another. Importantly – to repeat – the play of BDSM is *about* power but *is not* power. And it is here that the secret connection between the pairings of the sadist and masochist, the dominant and submissive, are exposed. It is not just that they need each other for play. It is not just that one operates through the other. The secret connection is that they are parts of each other: separate but a part of the same. The sadist and masochist, the dominant and submissive, play outside of power but wear its clothes. Their play is one of friends who *share the same flesh*.

#### XI.

Freud prefigures Bataille's problem from another perspective. Freud wonders about 'the tenacity with which we hold on to the sources of pleasure at our disposal, and in the difficulty with which we renounce them'. Primarily a pleasure seeker, the human is put in the greatest danger and jeopardy by this pursuit. Too much enjoyment leads to destruction. The pleasure principle is thus regulated and sublimated by the reality principle. The only species of activity to escape 'is phantasying which begins already in children's play'. For Freud, a child's play becomes a way to enter and master the adult world; children 'wish to be grown-up and to be able to do what grown-up people do'. For Freud, a child's play is sometimes connected to a primal sadism; children hand on any 'disagreeable experience to one of his playmates and in this way revenges himself on a substitute'.

But what if Freud has slipped? What if the play of children is not a way to enter the world of adults, nor a way to escape it, but an alternative to it? What if the play of children were outside of Freud's economy? What if the play of children truly broke with the tendency to preserve and was seen instead as the tendency to produce luxury and excess?

#### XII.

The first friends are found in playgrounds. Children play; they may play roles, but playing those roles is essentially an opening to possibility rather than its closure. The roles are liable to reversal and change, and for unexpected, surreal features to emerge. The play of children is not so much an emulation, even less a codification – it is a constant subversion and reversal of the world. It is an openness to otherness that the adult world has left behind. In order for play to happen children seek others out – the friend is another self.

#### XIII.

We say that a child may play alone, but watch and listen – they are not alone. For the child in play everything is alive once again as it was in those primordial scenes. Creation is occurring afresh, and strange new worlds are being populated. Children are beings of a world of animism. They live in a world of creation where anything is possible. Hear them speak: they are always already more than one, and they inhabit a world of the uncanny where hierarchy, reason, and purpose are in the greatest danger. It is a luxury that children can well afford.

#### XIV.

In childhood our friendships and play exhibit a basic faithfulness; that faithfulness is to excess and the superfluousness of ourselves and others. As childhood fades, play and friendships harden. Both lose their mercurial aspect – they become rarer, more rigid, and more confined. The more they do so, the less faithful we become. This is why the sudden re-appearance of a childhood friend is a case of Freudian uncanniness: 'that species of the frightening that goes back to what was once well known and had long been familiar'. The childhood friend brings back what was once possible but now long forgotten and denied. For a brief moment it reminds us that our world can become animated again – and it reminds us of what we are.

#### XV.

The return of the friend is the return of the trickster. A teller of tales, a wearer of masks and other people's clothes. By whose authority do they speak; in whose name does this author write? 'I am Nobody (Οὐτις)'. The trickster's true name cannot be known for they have many and none. A weaver of reality, the trickster conceals one thing in order to expose another. The trickster wears a mask to tell the truth, and makes truth unbelievable. Does the trickster question all reality

by making their own? Is this why the trickster is judged by God so harshly? Or is something else going on in the Garden . . .

### XVI.

The God of the Garden is omniscient, omnipresent, and above all omnipotent. He is as complete as His creation. Both God and creation are driven by natures and purposes known only to themselves. For such a being, friendship and play are impossible. The God of the Garden is jealous, destructive, and proud. This jealousy and pride are the opposite of friendship, the very existence of which is a challenge to all hierarchy. God banishes humans to prevent them from eating from the second tree: ‘The man has now become like one of us, knowing good and evil. He must not be allowed to reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life and eat, and live forever’. Jealousy, destruction and pride are the opposite of the play of sadism and domination; humans as the meek and suffering recipients of His will, the opposite of the play of masochism and submission. To be play, these relations may be about power, but are not power. There can be no friendship and play with God.

Yet, perhaps, it is as the atheist de Sade claims ‘Love is stronger than pride’. There *is* a trickster in the Garden: friendship and play are luxuries God squanders on His children.

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

### Notes on contributor

*Graham M. Smith* is associate professor in political theory at POLIS, University of Leeds. He has a long-standing interest in friendship and has published widely on this topic in journals such as *Good Society*, *Political Studies Review*, *Global Discourse*, and *International Politics*. He co-edits *AMITY: The Journal of Friendship Studies* with Dr Heather Devere.