Games as Pastimes in Suits’s Utopia: Meaningful Living and the “Metaphysics of Leisure”

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Bernard Suits’s The Grasshopper has become something of a cult classic in philosophical circles—especially among philosophers of sport. The book begins with a puzzle in the form of a recurring dream and ends with its solution. Sandwiched between the dream and its meaning, in a skillful manner, Suits puts forth and defends a definition of “game playing” as a voluntary attempt to overcome unneeded obstacles. In the final chapter, Suits solves the dream by proposing the seemingly untenable thesis that the ideal of human existence is the life of game playing.

True to the thesis entertained, and in real Platonic fashion, The Grasshopper is not only an attempt to defend the game-playing thesis but also an illustration of it. The illustration is obvious enough in the witty, playful, imaginative, and, most important, inefficient structure and style of the book. I take the game-playing structure of the book to be sufficiently evident to those familiar with the work, so it needs no further amplification. The defense of Suits’s thesis, however, is tied to his use of a counterfactually grounded Utopia at the book’s end.

This article takes a closer look at Suits’s Utopia and its relation to the thesis that the ideal of human existence is game playing. After fleshing out the Suitsian ideal and his notion of Utopia, I examine two possible objections. First, there is the incoherence objection, according to which Suits’s Utopia is a conceptually confused scenario, because it is a conceptually impossible scenario. Second, there is the stipulative objection, according to which Suits has used his imagination too freely and set up a Utopia where game playing has to be—through default and not willful choice—the ideal of human existence. At the end of this undertaking I consider the merits of salvaging Suits’s utopic vision by offering a heuristic interpretation, wherein Suits’s Utopia should be taken as a reasonably imaginable future toward which humans, through technological advances, are actually converging.

Grasshopper’s Dreams

The Grasshopper begins in Platonic fashion with a conversation between the Grasshopper and his disciples, Prudence and Skepticus. Twisting around a fable
of Aesop, Grasshopper, about to die with the oncoming of winter and his failure to prepare for it, offers an apology for his life devoted exclusively to play that is reminiscent of Socrates’s own apology in Apology and Crito. First, because he was placed on earth to play and die, it would be impious of Grasshopper to mock fate by doing otherwise. Second, he offers the following hypothetical syllogism: If he is provident in summer (by working to store up food for winter), then he will live through winter but cease to be a grasshopper. If he is improvident in summer, then he will die in winter. As he must be provident or improvident, he will either cease to be a grasshopper or die. Following Socrates, Grasshopper chooses death in preference to a false life (4: pp. 27–28).

Before departing from his disciples, Grasshopper leaves them with a riddle in the form of a recurring dream. Everyone alive, he relates, is actually playing elaborate games, though they go about their lives believing that they are pursuing most serious activities. In a subsequent dream, Grasshopper goes around and persuades everyone he meets that what has been revealed to him in the first dream is true. As each person absorbs that truth, each ceases to exist so completely that it is as if he had never existed. Here truth not only sets one free; truth annihilates (4: pp. 28–29)! The remainder of the book teases out the meaning of the dreams, with a focus on the former.

**Suits on the Ideal of Human Existence**

Suits defines the ideal of human existence, pure autotelic activity, as that thing or those things whose only justification is that they justify everything else; or, as Aristotle put it, those things for the sake of which we do other things, but which are not themselves done for the sake of anything else. (4: p. 149)

Suits’s notion of autotelicity is straightforwardly derivable from Plato, Aristotle, and other early teleologists. If some action, \( \alpha \), is undertaken for the sake of some end, \( \omega \), then it is \( \omega \) that one is really striving for, not \( \alpha \). It is \( \omega \) that makes \( \alpha \) worth doing.

What is pure autotelic activity for Suits? It turns out to be game playing, which he defines as follows:

To play a game is to attempt to achieve a specific state of affairs [prelusory goal], using only means permitted by rules [lusory means], where the rules prohibit use of more efficient in favor of less efficient means [constitutive rules], and where the rules are accepted just because they make possible such activity [lusory attitude]. (4: pp. 54–55)

Put succinctly, “Playing a game is the voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles” (4: p. 55). Such voluntary activity, Suits argues, is the only true, humanly meaningful autotelic activity, and he attempts to show that through his notion of Utopia.
Suits on “Utopia”

In Chapter 15 of *The Grasshopper*, Suits attempts to justify the claim that game playing is the ideal of human existence. To justify the rather controversial claim, he appeals to a counterfactual situation (4: p. 149). Suits has us imagine a Utopia where all instrumental human activities (i.e., types of work) are unneeded and have been eliminated. Machines, activated by mental telepathy (presumably because any other means of activation would be a form of work), now do the work of humans. So efficiently do they work that the number of goods they produce is plethoric, and there is a superabundance of each type of good. Furthermore, psychotherapy and the social sciences have made such advances that all possible interpersonal problems have been solved. People no longer need affection, approval, attention, and admiration. The advances of psychotherapy even make moral principles superfluous. Art, too, is unneeded and unpracticed, since the motivation for its creation—human aspirations, frustrations, hopes, fears, triumphs, tragedies, and the like—do not exist in Utopia. Science, philosophy, and all other forms of investigative inquiry do not exist in any significant sense, for Utopia is a society where all the important questions have already been answered. Finally, even love, friendship, and sex disappear (4: pp. 149–154).

In the end, Grasshopper argues that the only meaningful activity left is that of game playing. Game playing is what remains as the human ideal when one abstracts away all instrumental activities. As pure autotelic activity, “game playing makes it possible to retain enough effort in Utopia to make life worth living,” since there is “nothing to strive for because everything else has already been achieved” (4: p. 154). When Skepticus asks whether that makes game playing “the whole of the ideal of existence”—presumably, whether game playing is a sufficient and necessary condition for the ideal of human existence in Utopia—Grasshopper replies that it appears so, at least at this stage in the investigation (4: p. 154). Yet, that is not quite correct. Elsewhere, Grasshopper states that play is not sufficient but merely necessary for the ideal of human existence. He states, “Game playing performs a crucial role in delineating that ideal—a role which cannot be performed by any other activity and without which an account of the ideal is either incomplete or impossible” (4: p. 149).

Grasshopper and Skepticus go on to consider whether game playing is the only possible occupation in Utopia. Grasshopper proceeds in reductio fashion. He assumes that someone in Utopia wants to build a house. Since houses are in abundance in Utopia and readily available in every size, shape, and form, the desire to build one is merely the desire to bring about some end through overcoming unneeded obstacles. That, of course, is just to be playing a game (4: p. 157). He also assumes that someone wants to solve a scientific problem. Since all scientific problems are solved in Utopia, the desire to solve a problem is, again, the desire to bring about some end through overcoming unneeded obstacles. Therefore, like one who persists in a crossword puzzle without using the answer key, he too would be playing a game (4: p. 158). Suits sums up this “lusory attitude”:

I am truly the Grasshopper; that is, an adumbration of the ideal of existence, just as the games we play in our non-Utopian lives are intimations of things to come. For even now it is games which give us something to do when there is
nothing to do. We thus call games “pastimes”, and regard them as trifling fillers of the interstices in our lives. But they are much more important than that. They are clues to the future. And their serious cultivation now is perhaps our only salvation. That, if you like, is the metaphysics of leisure time. (4: p. 159)

In sum, although there may be other ways of passing the time in Utopia, like loafing or traveling, game playing is certainly the essence of Utopia—a condition sine qua non that gives meaning to human lives (4: p. 158).

The Incoherence Objection

How are we to take Suits’s notion of Utopia as a solution to the problem of the ideal of human existence? One answer, given by Keith Thompson in “Sport and Utopia” (5), is that the concept itself, in the precise manner that Suits lays it out, is not paradoxical; rather, it is incoherent. The ultimate irony for Thompson is Suits’s shortsightedness in failing to see that a challenge is only a challenge if one can fail to meet it. In Suits’s Utopia, any challenge can be met spontaneously through telepathy, and so nothing is challenging.

It seems reasonable to argue that such a Utopia could never come about because such a Utopia is logically impossible. Suits’s utopic vision asks us to imagine too much. He asks us to assume that all forms of labor could be accomplished through pressing a button or by using telepathy, but even such things, however trivial, are forms of work. Imagine, for instance, that a man wants a house of a certain sort or merely wants his current house to be changed in certain ways. Before he gives the necessary telepathic signal for the changes to occur, he has a specific amount of creative thinking to do about how best to exhibit his wants in the new or improved house. That, itself, is an instrumental activity and a form of work—perhaps, often, work of a strenuous sort—that cannot be done telepathically or by the push of a button.

Furthermore, imagine someone in Suits’s Utopia who comes to loathe acting in an autotelic manner all the time. Thus, he lays aside his telepathic talents and decides to do everything nonautotelically. He builds his house with his own hands; grows his own food; undertakes to write Newton’s *Principia* on his own, by reference only to the information that Newton himself had at his disposal; and so forth. Yet, all such activities, according to Suits’s utopic ideal and definition of “game,” are unnecessarily inefficient and would, presumably, be games of sorts. While his fellow utopists marvel at his game-playing creativity, he vigorously insists that he is being rebellious and not game playing. They congratulate him for his attempt at light-hearted trickery (since rebelliousness is impossible in Utopia) because all psychological problems have been solved. One must acknowledge that such a scenario seems impossible for Suits.

There seems to be a deeper problem. One may reasonably ask why people would play games if all psychological problems have been solved in Utopia. Is not game playing essentially a form of contentiousness, and is not contentiousness a psychological defect—something impossible in Utopia? If so, what thrill, then, could people get from playing games? Why would one wish to compete against oneself for a personal record or against another person for victory?
One might object that not all game playing is motivated by contentiousness—that games are sometimes, at least inherently, stimulating or light-hearted ways of passing time. Yet, such an objection seems thin, given Suits’s definition of game playing as overcoming unnecessary obstacles. Even open games such as two people throwing a baseball back and forth to each other with the aim of going as long as they can without dropping the ball seem, minimally, to be forms of contentiousness. What is stimulating about such open-ended play is the possibility that both participants are so skilled that they could keep the game going longer than any other couple or, from the perspective of either player, that if the game did not go on very long, it would be because of the other person’s dearth of skill and not one’s own.7

The point should now be clear: Suits’s Utopia does too much work for him, so much so that it shows itself to be manifestly incoherent.

Finally, is there really reason to believe that a society where no activities could be instrumental in any significant sense would be utopic? One has, in Suits’s Utopia, nothing else to do but pass time. One could, of course, opt to alleviate boredom through excessive drug use or a large number of sleeping tablets and a slug or two of whiskey. Yet, I suppose in Utopia either would amount to playing a game, as one could presumably merely think oneself into a stupor or commit suicide more efficiently by just thinking oneself out of existence.

The Stipulative Objection

According to the stipulative objection, Suits has not shown that game playing is the ideal of human existence—he has merely stipulated that it is. Suits has defined Utopia in such a way that there are no reasonable candidates for meaningful utopic activities, other than sportive activities, and that amounts to question begging. The logic may be summed as follows:

1. In Utopia, all instrumental activities can be accomplished by mere thought (4: p. 149).
2. Therefore, in Utopia all instrumental activities are vain.
3. Game playing is the only activity that people really want, and do not need, to do (4: pp. 154, 156).
4. An activity that people really want, and do not need, to do is the only autotelic activity.
5. Therefore, game playing is the only autotelic activity.
6. Therefore, people will play games in Utopia.

There are certain problems with this argument. Let us first consider Premise 3. The third premise rules out other activities that could be suitable candidates for meaningful autotelic activity—activities such as reading, writing, and contemplation, which Suits disregards. However, such activities seem prima facie no less suitable than game playing for the human ideal and should not be given short shrift. Suits gives no reasons for ruling those out and preferring game playing, and that is called “stacking the deck.” Moreover, Premise 1 states that in Utopia, where by definition all instrumental activities are vain, any activity whatsoever that one undertakes will be some form of game, because it can always be done, say, by a
telepathically operated machine. For example, even reading will be a game, as one could take in the storyline of a novel much more efficiently by mere wishing. What of reading for sheer enjoyment—as an end and not for the sake of learning? Premise 3 rules that out stipulatively, and that seems manifestly tendentious.

If the stipulative objection is correct, then Suits is guilty of circular reasoning—though not of a vicious sort. In effect, Suits argues that game playing is the ideal of human existence by ruling out other reasonable candidates through merely positing that, in a world where people could always do whatever they wanted to do, they would play games. Nowhere does he show the inadequacy of other suitable candidates.

Thought experiments, if they are to be of any philosophical worth, can only go so far. To create a human society where the only conceivable actions can be forms of game playing is not to show that game playing is the human end but to stipulate that it is, and stipulation is not argument.

A Heuristic Solution?

The objections considered previously seem decisive. Perhaps the only way to answer them is to say that Suits’s Utopia should not be understood literally but rather heuristically. To do so is to argue that Suits’s utopic vision is meant to be a glimpse into a foreseeable future toward which we may be converging and from which we may learn something about ourselves today.

Coming to Suits’s defense, Kretchmar takes such a heuristic slant. He writes that Suits “hints that our current existence is, from time to time, game dependent, inasmuch as it occasionally gives us a foretaste of an instrumentally free mode of living” (my italics; 2: p. 69). Current circumstances, Kretchmar adds, are at least sometimes problem free, and those worry-free episodes, given advances in technology, allow us a glimpse into a possible future existence where there is absolutely nothing significant to do. With nothing to do, following Suits, we are left playing games (2: pp. 70–71).

Kretchmar is critical of Suits’s approach to discovering the human ideal and rightly so, as Suits arrives at the human ideal by default. When everything that needs to be done gets done, we are left with nothing meaningful to do. In such a circumstance, we can either experience the suffocating effects of boredom or we can pass the time playing games. Since we do not want to experience the suffocating effects of boredom, we play games. Following Kretchmar’s criticism, game playing as the end of human activity is a queer sort of telos in the Aristotelian sense. What is worse, game playing, undertaken by default, winds up not being autotelic activity at all. It is activity with a very definite end—the elimination of boredom (2: p. 71).

In spite of his criticism, Kretchmar sees fit to salvage Suits’s Utopia, and he does so anthropologically. Stating that Suits’s genius is unmistakable, Kretchmar searches for a thesis encrypted in the text or hidden in the man. He says that Suits is an astute anthropological philosopher, if only intuitively, who must have come to grips with much boredom himself and found “gaming up life to be irresistible” as a means of overcoming it (2: pp. 74–75). From an anthropological perspective, Suits’s utopic vision is unsettling “because we currently gaze out onto a world
in which there is, at least from time to time, nothing to do.” Given the advances of technology, Suits’s Utopia, anthropologically grasped, is a “slowly merging reality, not an in-principle state of affairs that must exist either full-blown or not at all” (2: p. 74).

Can a heuristic interpretation, like the anthropological sort given by Kretchmar, salvage something of Suits’s Utopia, or is it too charitable of a reading?

To answer that question, one must return to Suits’s reason for introducing Utopia in the first place—to show that game playing is the one and only end of human existence. The incoherence and stipulative objections are problematic for Utopia, but they have not shown that game playing is not the end of human existence.

Kretchmar, however, is more concerned with Suits’s unexpressed intuitions of Utopia than with his expressed notions of the human end. Thus, the objections I have formulated are, for Kretchmar, “quite beside the point”—merely “problem[s] for philosophers,” who deal with logical constructs, not real-world issues. Consequently, although Kretchmar is charitable, in part, because of Suits’s avowed genius, he is also charitable because of his pragmatic slant. Kretchmar does not buy into game playing as the human ideal, since talk of “ideals” is bunkum that does not concern the “problems of men” but, presumably, only the problems of philosophers, who are apparently out of tune with the problems of men (2: p. 75).

In such a manner, Kretchmar’s attempt to salvage Suits’s intuitive anthropological astuteness is so charitable that it bears no resemblance to the position that Suits has attempted to advance.

Problems such as incoherence and the human ideal are not beside the point—not philosophically or even anthropologically. Coherence in language and thinking is vitally important in real-world decision making, and whether game playing is the human ideal, if there is such a thing, is very relevant anthropologically, since much rides on its truth or falsity. Thus, Kretchmar’s heuristic interpretation of Utopia does not answer the aforementioned problems; it merely sidesteps them. Given the failings of his approach, I attempt my own answer to the problems.

From all that is said thus far, we may attempt to salvage Suits’s thesis by asking whether game playing is the human ideal, even if Suits’s Utopia does not demonstrate that it is. The question now becomes, in a world where technological advances alleviate the need for us to fulfill many but not all of our immediate and most pressing needs, would we choose games and only games as a meaningful way to pass our time?

The simplest and most sensible way to answer the question is to observe the sorts of noninstrumental activities that we now do in our spare time, without the absurdly strict constraints of Suits’s Utopia. Indeed, we do spend an inordinate amount of our spare time playing games of all sorts. However, we also spend much time in other leisure activities—for instance, watching television, reading, and even contemplating. Some people even prefer to idle away spare hours through boondogling or sleeping. Therefore, an appeal to experience fails to show that playing games is the sole, or even chief, human end. It may be just what people with spirited or restive dispositions prefer to do to pass their leisure.
In agreement with Kretchmar, taken heuristically, Suits’s Utopia forebodes a technological future when game playing will likely be an important part of the salvation of the human race. Nonetheless, that technological future may turn out to be a real *Paradise Lost*.

Utopias of a deeply fulfilling sort may be much easier to attain than the sort Suits envisages. Perhaps, as Plato reckons in *The Republic*, the things we really need are few and relatively easy to acquire. Only when our wants outstrip our needs do we seek out largely “inefficient” means to satisfy ourselves. We build luxurious domiciles, trade for perfumes and fancy linens, cavort with paid escorts, and even begin to war with other peoples, just so we get the things we want but do not need. Only when we abandon Plato’s vision for a simple lifestyle, embodied by his *kallipolis*, do we seek out the sort of prodigal, high-tech society that Suits envisages in his Utopia. Yet, if Plato is correct, and perhaps he is, then even being able to get anything one wants by merely thinking it so would be indicative of a feverish society (3: pp. 369a–373a), not a Utopia.

It is possible that Suits knows what Plato knew all the while. If so, the game he has been playing with his readers throughout is that the assumed counterfactual scenario is not a counterfactual scenario at all. Perhaps we currently live in a feverish city, called *Rien-a-faire*, and life as we now live it is just one big game. Perhaps there are no meanings to any of the games we play, other than the meanings we give them. At this point, we come to a fork in the road: We can either quietly play away our days as if engaged in grave pursuits or we can spend our free time as philosophers in recognition of the absurdity of it all. Yet if we chose the latter—poof!—we might just choose to “think ourselves” out of existence, and that just might be the meaning of the second dream.

Notes

1. I would like to thank the three anonymous referees of *JPS* for their many helpful comments on an earlier version of this article.
2. Grasshopper says, “I would like to begin by representing the ideal of human existence as though it were already instituted as a social reality.”
3. This seems to be a rather naïve view of the psychogenesis of artistic creations.
4. It is wise to heed Donald Davidson’s advice:

   If we explain it [i.e., incoherence] too well, we turn it into a concealed form of rationality; while if we assign incoherence too glibly, we merely compromise our ability to diagnose irrationality by withdrawing the background of rationality needed to justify any diagnosis at all. (1: p. 303)

5. I am assuming here that light-hearted trickery would be admissible in Utopia.
6. After introducing his Utopia and arguing for games as the ideal of human existence, Suits reintroduces certain emotions—admiration, sharing, love, friendship, the joy of victory, and the bitterness of defeat. The sentiment is, with all psychological problems solved in a culture based
not on want but on plenty, that certain harmless or good emotions will remain. That sentiment, very Stoic-like, seems difficult to square with what Suits has said earlier. At least, Suits owes his readers some amplification here (4: p. 158).


8. Elsewhere called a “prediction” by Kretchmar (2: p. 73).

9. Following Dewey here (4: p. 75). One wonders why Kretchmar has spent any time at all arguing that a human ideal that is arrived at by default is not a genuine telos.

References


