Philosophy: Fun & Games
2017-18

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Office hours: Thursdays, 2:00-3:00 and by appointment, DSB 6.09.
Course Administrator: Ann-Marie Cowe philinfo@ed.ac.uk

Communication

Students are responsible for checking their University email and the LEARN page for this course regularly (at least once per week) so that they do not miss any important announcements for the course.

Course Aims and Objectives

This course investigates the philosophy of play and the philosophy of games. Games are philosophically interesting in part because manifest something important and distinctive about human nature. While other creatures engage in play, human beings are perhaps the only creatures who play games. Indeed, playing games is plausibly an important part of the good life for creatures like us, and some have argued games would be the only fundamental source of value in Utopia. Games also are plausibly constituted by norms and aims in a way that has made them an attractive model for numerous other philosophically vexatious phenomena – meaning in natural language, morality and beauty, for example. In this course we will investigate the concept of a game, the concept of play and the relationship between these concepts. We also investigate the value of play and games, and the way they figure in a good life as well as their possible role in Utopia.

A core text for the course is Bernard Suits’ underappreciated masterpiece, The Grasshopper. Written in the style of a Socratic dialogue, The Grasshopper attempts to turn the classic Aesop’s Fable of the ant and the grasshopper on its head. The dialogue opens with the Death of the Grasshopper, in which the Grasshopper is surrounded by his followers and explains why his ideas are worth dying for, and why the life of the ant is so deeply misguided – even paradoxical. The analogy with Plato’s The Crito is unmistakable, and very well done. Indeed, The Grasshopper is a masterpiece not only in terms of its philosophical content, but in terms of its literary style.

Suits engages directly with Wittgenstein’s thesis that ‘game’ cannot be defined. Wittgenstein admonishes us not to just assume there must be some definition in the offering but to look and see. Suits takes him at his word, and looks more carefully than Wittgenstein himself seems to have. He systematically develops and defends his definition of ‘game’ against a battery of
objections from his interlocutors. He then explains why the life of the Grasshopper, which
consists in playing games rather than working, is superior to the life of the ant. The dialogue
concludes with some discussion of Utopia, in which the Grasshopper argues that the playing
of games is a kind of master value for human beings which would play a central structuring
role in Utopia.

Against the backdrop of Suits’ work, which is a foil for many of the other readings for the
course, we will investigate the following questions (among others):

- Is life a game we are playing?
- Can ‘game’, ‘play’ and ‘play a game’ be reductively defined?
- Is ‘game’ a family resemblance word?
- What interesting relationships hold between play (full-stop) and playing a game?
- What (if anything) is the opposite of play?
- Is it possible to cheat at a given game while still playing that game?
- What makes a game a good one?
- Is there something paradoxical about the attitude one must take up to play a game?
- Can there be a game with no rules?
- Are games well understood in terms of their functions?
- What is the role of games in a good life?
- What is the role of games in Utopia?

**Intended learning outcomes:**

By the end of this course students should:

- Have a grasp of fundamental issues in the philosophy of games and play.
- Be able to critically analyse and engage with literature by key philosophers in this
  field.
- Be able to present arguments clearly and concisely both within a classroom context
  and in a written essay.
- Gain transferrable skills in research, analysis and argumentation.

**Outline of Topics:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Week 1</th>
<th>Introduction to the Course and “Is Life a Game We are Playing?”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Week 2</td>
<td>Work, Play and Playing a Game</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week 3</td>
<td>Play, Full-Stop</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week 4</td>
<td>Family Resemblances</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week 5</td>
<td>Games and the Lusory Attitude</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week 6</td>
<td>Cheating and Trifling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week 7</td>
<td>Games, Rules and Paradox</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week 8</td>
<td>Non-Competitive Games, Open Games and Make-Believe Games</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week 9</td>
<td>Games, Commitments and Functions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week 10</td>
<td>Games and Utopia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week 11</td>
<td>Games and the Good Life</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Readings:

The main text for the course is Bernard Suits, *The Grasshopper*, Broadview Press, 2005 (originally published in 1978). This is available from Blackwell’s.

The other materials are available online through JSTOR or the library’s collection of ejournals. In some cases, readings are provided online through the dedicated webpage for the course on LEARN – this is noted below.

**Week 1: Introduction to the Course: Is Life a Game We are Playing?**


**Week 2: What is the relationship between play, fun, and playing a game?**


**Week 3: The meaning of ‘play’**


**Week 4: Is ‘game’ a family resemblance word?**

- Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, sections 66-71 (available online)

**Week 5: Games and Sports**

- Bernard Suits, Chapters 1-3 [all references below to “Suits,” unless otherwise noted, are to Bernard Suits, *The Grasshopper*, Broadview Press, 2005, originally published in 1978]

**Week 6: Cheating and Trifling**

- Suits, Chapter 4.
- Richard Royce, “Game Players and Game-Playing: a response to Kreider,” *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport*, 201 [ejournal].
Week 7: Competition and Cooperation

- Suits, Chapters 5, 6 and 7.
- Thi Nguyen, “Cooperation as Competition,” Forthcoming in the Journal of the Philosophy of Sport; this paper is also available here: file:///C:/Users/Michael/Downloads/Competition_as_Cooperation%20(3).pdf
- Michael Ridge, “Illusory Attitudes and the Playful Stoic,” available on LEARN.

Week 8: Non-Competitive Games, Open Games and Make-Believe Games

- Suits, Chapters 8-13

Week 9: Games, Commitments and Functions

- Michael Ridge, “Playing Well With Others” (LEARN)
- Michael Ridge, “Individuating Games” (LEARN)

Week 10: Games and Utopia

- Suits, chapters 14 and 15.
- Avery Kolers, “The Grasshopper’s Error or How Life is a Game we are playing.” (https://www.academia.edu/401242/The_Grasshoppers_Error_or_On_How_Life_is_a_Game) (also on LEARN)

Week 11: Games and the Good

- Michael Ridge, “Games and the Good Life.” (LEARN)

Assessment Structure

Undergraduates will be assessed by a 1500 word essay worth 40% due on Thursday 26 October 2017 by 12 pm, and a final 2500 word essay worth 60% due on Thursday 14 December by 12 pm. Suggested topics are listed below.

Alternative topics are possible, but must have the approval of the course organizer at least one week before the essay is due.

Senior Honours students may opt to write a long essay (5000 words) in lieu of the above, as part of their dissertation requirement in Philosophy. The title must be arranged with the instructor (no later than 26 October), and is due in to the Teaching office on 19 December, by 12pm

Feedback on all assessed work will be provided within 3 weeks, unless otherwise notified by email.
Suggested Essay topics:

Listed below are recommended essay topics. Students may, *with my explicit permission*, work on other topics, though they must be appropriately related to the content of the course. If you intend to propose and alternative topic, then please discuss it with me well in advance of the due date so that it can be agreed before you start working on it if it is an acceptable topic. Alternative topics must be agreed *at least* one week before the essays are due.

Topics for essay 1:

- Is life a game we are playing?
- Can ‘game’ be defined? If so what is the most plausible definition? Be sure to discuss why this question might matter to broader philosophical debates.
- Can ‘play’ qua play full-stop be defined? If so, what is the most plausible definition?
- Is it possible to give a unified semantics for ‘play’ when used as a transitive verb – one that will cover the wide range of objects ‘play’ can take? Note that systematic context-sensitivity is one form a unified semantics could take.
- Does ‘playing a game’ entail ‘playing’ (full-stop)?
- Does ‘play’ have an opposite and if so what is it?
- Is ‘game’ a family resemblance word?
- Is ‘play’ a family resemblance word?
- Are all sports games?
- Can ‘sport’ be defined?
- Can someone cheat and play the game in which he is cheating at the same time?
- Does ‘trifling’ entail that someone is not playing a game?

Topics for essay 2:

- Can there be a game with no goal or with no rules?
- Is the very idea of game playing paradoxical?
- Is “Striving Play” in Nguyen’s sense a plausible ideal for playing competitive games?
- Is it possible to play a competitive game while playing full-stop?
- Are games well understood in functional terms?
- How should be understand the individuation of games?
- Does game playing play a privileged role in any plausible theory of Utopia? Discuss with reference to Suits’ views and arguments.
- Is the best life one led as a kind of “meta-game”?
- Is game playing an intrinsic good, and if so is it a derivative or fundamental one? Discuss with reference to Hurka and Tasioulas.
• How are the goods of achievement and play (full-stop) related in the context of the value of games?

**Feedback on drafts of essays**

I will provide feedback on first drafts of essays. Although this is not a requirement of the course, I strongly encourage students to take advantage of this opportunity. There are few steps you can take to improve your essay which are more effective than this (assuming you make a real effort with your first draft, anyway). However, in order for me to be sure to have enough time to provide quality feedback to you in time for you to make useful revisions based on that feedback, you must have a draft to me (via email) no later than 1 week before the due date for the essay in question. In this case, for the first essay this means no later than Thursday 19 October by 12 pm, and for the second essay this means no later than Thursday 7 December by 12 pm.

**Formative Work**

Although not part of the official assessment, students are also encouraged (but not required) to provide a weekly one page critical discussion of a specific idea or argument from one of the readings for that week. Students may use either standard forms of philosophical writing or experiment with Socratic dialogue in the style of Suits if they so choose for formative work. Such formative work should be emailed to the instructor at least 24 hours before the next class meeting.

**Supplemental Readings**

*Literary background for Suits*

• Plato, *The Republic*, Book II: [http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/republic.3.ii.html](http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/republic.3.ii.html)

*General background reading*

• Cooper, W.E. review of *The Grasshopper in Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, 1982. 409-415 [JSTOR] [an interesting critical review of Suits – probably best read only after you have read the main text]
• McGonigal, Jane. *Reality is Broken*, 2011, Vintage Books [also relevant to games and utopian theorizing; this is not really a philosophy book but it provides a wealth of useful examples and interesting perspective on the transformative potential of games in people’s lives and for society more widely – perhaps usefully read alongside of the last part of *The Grasshopper*]
Defining ‘play’ and play versus playing a game


The role of play and games in the good life

- Brown, Stuart. 2010. *Play: How it Shapes the Brain, Opens the Imagination, and Invigorates the Soul*. (this is not a philosophy book, and so is only indirectly relevant; it summarizes some potentially relevant empirical findings on play and its role in the good life, though)

‘Game’ as a family resemblance word


Sports and Games

- Papineau, D. *Knowing the Score* (Constable Press), chapter 18. [cautionary note: Papineau ignores Suits’ change in view]

Cheating