Towards an Ontology of Play: Eugen Fink’s Notion of Spiel

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Plato’s *Timeaus* is a feast of discourse on man and the world, a banquet sponsored by Socrates’ friends, whom he has entertained the previous day with a celebration of justice in the city. It takes place on the day of Pallas Athena’s festival (cf. 20 c.). Socrates asks after a member of the previous day’s group who today is missing; Timaeus explains that he has been taken ill. Perhaps it is not too fanciful to suggest that philosophers from Aristotle to Alfred North Whitehead, and beyond, have volunteered to serve as the mysterious fourth at the Timaeus-feast. Eugen Fink is one of these.

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Play is both a cosmic symbol and a symbol of the cosmos: Professor Fink’s study of Spiel simultaneously pursues hermeneutics and ontology. In the final chapter of his Spiel als Weltsymbol, Fink offers the following thesis-statement:

“Human play is a particularly outstanding way in which Dasein understandingly comports itself to the totality of that which is, and which lets itself be penetrated by that totality. In the play of men the world-totality shines back into itself, and lets infinity shimmer on and in an intramundane and finite entity.²

It is possible for men to play, and it is possible for them to experience the world. These possibilities must be thought together: “An ekstasis of human existence (Dasein) eventuates (ereignet sich) in human play” (Sp, 231). “Because we are open to the world, and because a knowledge of the groundlessness of the ruling totality is involved in this openness of Dasein to the world, can we play at all; because he is ‘worldly,’ man is a player” (Sp, 239). In order to open these brief formulations and give our understanding of Professor Fink’s project more play-space, we offer five sections of exposition: (1) major sources for the project, (2) a consideration of child’s play, (3) ritual or cult-play, (4) world play, and (5) the play of thought.

I. Sources

A. Heraclitus of Ephesus

The fifty-second fragment of Heraclitus (Diels) reads: Aion pais esti paizon, pesseuon. Paidos e basileie. “Aion is a child playing at draughts; kingship is the child’s.” Aion means cosmic time, the course of the world through time.³ “The totality of being, and indeed the ruling world, is addressed in the symbolic likeness of the ‘playing child,’ pais paizon. The most primordial bringing-forth has the character of play. The world rules—as play” (Sp, 28-9). The child at play is a name

²Spiel als Weltsymbol (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1960), p. 230, hereinafter referred to as “Sp”.