God's Playthings: Eugen Fink's Phenomenology of Religion in Play as Symbol of the World

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Abstract

Although Eugen Fink often reflected upon the role religion, these reflections are yet to be addressed in secondary literature in any substantive sense. For Fink, religion is to be understood in relation to “play,” which is a metaphor for how the world presents itself. Religion is a non-repetitive, and entirely creative endeavor or “symbol” that is not achieved through work and toil, or through evaluation or power, but rather, through his idea of play and “cult” as the imaginative distanciation from a predictable lifeworld. This paper describes Fink’s understanding of religion and its most relevant aspects found in Spiel als Weltsymbol. The paper is organized into five sections—1: An introduction to his phenomenological approach in general, and description of the role of “play”; 2: investigations into the relation between play and world; 3: a description of his phenomenology of religion; 4: engagements in the idea of cult-play and the sacred sphere, and 5: reflection on his idea of the play of God.

Keywords

Fink – phenomenology of religion – play – symbol

Only the play of the world permits us to think the essence of God.

DERRIDA¹

¹ Derrida “Violence and Metaphysics” in Writing and Difference, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967),107.
When the dominant experience of the world thrives on assembly-line production, the concept of “the world” is abolished ... the real world is forfeited.

GÜNTER ANDERS

An essential aspect of Eugen Fink’s work culminated in a description of the phenomenality of “play” and how its being misunderstood has some latent theological roots. His development of play is different from our everyday familiarity with that term, and he points to it as a symbol with the unique power to wrench us from the rigidities in which mundane, everyday life presents itself. Play is irreducible to, and distinguishable from both work and leisure yet often operative in both. It is a form of Gelassenheit, or letting go, yet it also manifests itself in suffering. Play is a special kind of engagement in imagination and as such opens a “magical dimension” that is both enchanting and ambiguous, both reflectively timeless and poetic. Play is not merely one phenomenon among many, but is a “key phenomenon,” a “symbol” that both sutures us to the world, and tells us about how the world itself works—the whole of the world is mirrored in the part (Hegel) of a simple experience of play because play has a symbolic representation that is ever-in-flux (Heraclitus). Play lacks moral responsibility or is beyond good/evil and is thus a metaphor for the very phenomenality of the cosmos (Nietzsche). In his earliest remarks on the subject, Fink concludes that “play, as a speculative concept determines the constitution of the being of the human, his ‘nature.’”

Although typically we understand philosophy as antithetical to play—with its dispositions toward ambiguity and opacity, to charm and disguise—play maintains a dimension in need of philosophical investigation. More than ambiguous and charming, play is a portrayal and representation of how things
really are, albeit, its expression of such reality is indirect. As Fink put it in 1966, “play does not need a philosophy—and philosophy is not play.” This is because play remains in a speculative, non-positivist domain of thinking.

These reflections on Play then get applied by Fink to religion (often overlooked in studies of Fink’s work), namely in the context of his understanding of ‘cult’ which is a term that he leverages uniquely to describe aspects of both ancient Greek religion as well as twentieth century Christianity. Play and cult have a sort of exclusive relationship, as they both are forms of imaginative distanciation from a predictable and established life world. “Play” for Fink, as he sums it up in 1973, is not religion per se, but constitutes “a human root of religion, ritual, liturgy and at the same time a destructive motive in life.”6 Play builds up and tears down; it creates masks and dissolves them.7 As such it depicts an enigmatic “reality” and portrays possibilities that are irreducible (yet not antithetical) to “actualities.”

In general, Fink’s work can be interpreted through the lens of an attempt and struggle to untangle various extremes with greater detail. He struggles against Husserl and Heidegger, at times playing the role of advocate for both, yet also explicating over time his own approach that is to be distinguished from them.8 As Moran also noted, Fink wishes to retain the rigor of Husserl’s reductions but recognizes the necessity of putting the world itself under investigation, not simply as a neutral or invisible horizon, but as a product or “end-consti-tution” (End-konstitution) of another suspension. This ever-changing world or

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4 “Notes on Play and Philosophy” in Eugen Fink, Play as Symbol of the World, trans. Ian Alexander Moore and Christopher Turner (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016), 282.

5 One helpful, although not extensive engagement with Fink and religion (or Fink and divinity) comes from Natalie Depraz, “Die Frage des Ideals: an Hand des Ausdrucks der Göttliche Mensch in uns/in sich” in Eugen Fink: Sozialphilosophie—Anthropologie—Kosmologie—Pädagogik, ed. Anselm Böhmer (Würzburg, Germany: Königshausen & Neumann, 2006).

6 Ibid. Eugen Fink “Notes on Play and Philosophy,” 284.

7 Regarding the special role of play in Fink, especially helpful is Thomas Franz “Weltspiel und Spielwelt: Eugen Finks symbolische Kosmologie” in Nielsen and Sepp, Welt Denken, 250–266.

8 One could recall many important criticisms and distinctions, but to exemplify this point, one might observe here an important criticism of Heidegger that segues perfectly into Fink’s own project over and above Heidegger: “Here it is not a matter of examining ontic phenomenon and holding fast in descriptive concepts nor of characterizing ‘ontological-ly’ the ontic phenomenon of human play ... here it is a matter of something simpler and more primordial: grasping the human being’s world-position under the guidance of a specific understanding of play’ Fink, Play as Symbol, 54. It is here worth noting that my investitigation is limited to description of Fink’s religion. This does not mean, however, that there are not criticisms worth entertaining. For an investigation of such shortcomings of this work in general, see Hans G. Gadamer’s review “Spiel als Weltsymbol” in Philosophische Rundschau 91 (1961)
cosmogony entails, as Heidegger knew, the ever-changing results of phenomenology, which must dethrone the ego. Being imbues the transcendental ego as both origin and goal, as in and for “the world.” Where the natural attitude was for Husserl the beginning point of investigation, for Fink it was the product of transcendental constitution.9

Other figures in the history of philosophy also are formative to his thought. His understanding of “world,” for example, seems fraught with angst, and caught between Nietzschean affirmation and Platonic essentialism, almost reflective of an escapism. His Hegelian influences drive him to reduce the human in order to arrive at a nearly gnostic absolute (thus a speculative philosophy that aims to go beyond psychologism, and this is one reason why Moran will suggest that Fink “begins from Hegel, whom he wants to reconcile with Husserl.”).10 His depictions of the relations between philosophy and religion in Spiel als Weltsymbol also depict a certain torture of mind and thought of one who, on the one hand cannot tear the fishhook of a metaphysical theology from his mind, yet on the other, operates with the hope for philosophical investigation and discovery that holds a distance that brings the general idea of often latent divinities to which we are beholden into the light. He conceives philosophy as a means of grasping “human life in its unquestioned character,” whereas “in religion God speaks, and through the mouth of the prophet and herald, gives a superhuman explanation of the meaning of life and the world as a whole to be known.” Philosophy is a “self-interpretation of human existence and of its sojourn in the world,” while religion is “an alien interpretation. This distinction is fundamental and irreconcilable.”11

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9 Moran especially is good here in describing Fink’s relationship with Husserl: “Fink characterizes Husserlian phenomenology as ‘regressive’, so that it needs to be complemented by his own ‘progressive’ or ‘constructive’ phenomenology. Of course, Heidegger too, in his 1928 lectures, was insisting that phenomenology required a ‘construction’ to offset its destructive phase. Presumably Fink was deeply influenced by Heidegger’s thinking in this regard.” Dermot Moran, “Fink’s Speculative Phenomenology: Between Constitution and Transcendence” in Research in Phenomenology, 37 (2007), 17. See also Eugen Fink, Sixth Cartesian Meditation, 142. For more on Fink and his relationship with Husserl, see Fink’s “Was will die Phänomenologie Edmund Husserls?” in Studien zur Phänomenologie 1930–1939, 157–78; translated by Arthur Grugan as “What Does the Phenomenology of Edmund Husserl Want to Accomplish?” Research in Phenomenology, 2 (1972): 5–27.

10 For more on his relationship with Hegel, see here Fink’s posthumous Sein und Mensch: Vom Wesen der ontologischen Erfahrung (Freiburg: Alber, 1977). Dermot Moran, “Fink’s Speculative Phenomenology: Between Constitution and Transcendence” in Research in Phenomenology 37 (2007: 3–31), 16.

11 Fink Play as Symbol, 39. Spiel als Weltsymbol originally was published in 1960, and also found in German in 2010 as Vol 7 of Eugen Fink Gesamtausgabe. On the human as “a question,” see the recent article by Núria Sara Miras Boronat, “Oasis of happiness: The
Religion and philosophy are two distinct domains because religion concerns the utterly other and unknown, while philosophy concentrates its activities around pre-given assumptions of value that are question/challenge worthy. To stop here would be a grave misunderstanding, however, because for Fink this does not entail that religious interpretation is incapable of further proceeding, nor does it mean that theological reflection or thinking (or even a “reduction” or attitude) is devalued. He in fact wishes to safeguard religious life and reflection from the same \textit{fallenness} to which philosophy has succumbed in its constant suspension (and occasional allowance) of non-real entities and improvable affects. For him “the tendency of the great thinkers to address what to them is supremely worthy of thought with the solemn names of mythical-religious language and to make use of preformed human pathos has just as much harmed philosophy as it has religion.”\footnote{Ibid.} The metaphysical lattice upon which philosophers have allowed their concepts to intertwine and climb towards an \textit{eidos} of myth has been a detriment to both disciplines. At another point he claims that philosophy must extend itself towards what religion denies it, and that philosophy must grasp “religion itself as a symbol, as a \textit{metaphor}, which is traced back to the world-relation of human existence.” In the end, philosophical thinking can reach description of the human and the world (after all humankind does not just have a world, “\textit{er ist Welt}”!), but decidedly not reach the gods.\footnote{Fink, quoted by Georg Stenger, “Finks Weltkosmoi—Entsprechungen und Widerstreit” in Nielsen and Sepp, \textit{Welt Denken}, 321. For Fink, “But vis-a-vis religion, philosophy, as one may declare as a freethinking opinion, does not itself need to take the standpoint of religion and to recognize without question its demarcations between the human and the superhuman. On the contrary, it must attempt to extend its own competence even to that which is denied it by religion: it must attempt to understand religion itself as a symbol, as a metaphor, which is traced back to the world-relation of human existence.” to see “traces of the universe in the dimension of the divine.” Further, “the human being and the world can be reached by philosophical thinking; gods cannot.” Fink \textit{Play as Symbol}, 139.}

Yet again, one would be rash to assume that the tensions remain in a double-bind that rests its case on dialectic between all of these extremes, or that philosophy in the end is the ultimate gatekeeper and judge of religious reflection. Such tensions fuel Fink to find modes of phenomenological expression beyond the pale of the dichotomies he depicts:

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Play of the World and Human Existence. Eugene Fink’s Multidimensional Concept of Play” in \textit{Philosophical Perspectives on Play} eds. M. MacLean, W. Russell, E. Ryall (London: Routledge, 2016).

\footnote{Ibid.}
In no way do I thus mean to say something detrimental about the truth of religion, only that its truth must be thought in an entirely different manner than the truth that belongs to the human understanding of Being and to the human world-relation. Only the truth of the understanding of Being and of world-openness belongs to philosophy. The truth of religion certainly does not relate to the truth of philosophy as the ‘representation’ to the ‘concept’—as it did in Hegel’s hybrid conception, which thought that philosophy is ‘absolute knowledge’ and for this reason could leave no truth external to it, but rather had to include everything within itself…. Philosophy does not think in the intense brilliance of the concept what religion believes in representative images. Each attempt to dissolve religion into philosophy leads to a theologization of philosophy.

*Play as Symbol*, 140

Both a phenomenological philosophy, and a newly understood religious interpretation of everyday life may help us overcome our cultural overemphasis upon work that has led to the globe becoming “the battle theater of this restless species, the material for its labor, the field for its battles.”¹⁴ The western *Zeitgeist*, as Fink interpreted it in the 50’s leading to the publication of his Magnum Opus *Spiel als Weltsymbol*, had become conditioned with artificiality to the point that our machine-like accuracy was a matter of work that foreclosed even more the role of play in all its unpredictability and vitality of strengthening social bonds. In this context it could be suggested that Fink also furnishes a proto-post-secularity (or at least an attempt to think beyond the secular/religion divide) by calling into question the typically cheap and clear-cut lines between sacred/profane that also tend to be sustained further by technological work.

He does not seek to undermine the secular in any way, but instead to draw attention to how the human operates in relation to its worlds. Despite supposing to be more “worldly,” secular life has become the opposite: “The worldliness of playing does not emerge gradually in a dismantling of its primeval-religious character. We do not at all attain the worldedness of existence by mere ‘processes of secularization’ that only sap a religious substance and a ‘spiritual’ interpretation of life.”¹⁵ Yet Fink also points to how human play in terms of the world is not by necessity religious or even an “echo-phenomenon” of the cult. Religion and God can be understood as grand symbols that tell us about ourselves. As Mercer recently claimed, “Perhaps unexpectedly, one finds that

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¹⁴ Ibid.
¹⁵ Ibid., 186.
the earliest uses of God as a phenomenological metaphor does not come from the French but from Eugen Fink.” God, in other words, helps us understand philosophy itself, and as evidenced in Fink’s attempt to bring the absolute into reflection, the idea of God also “drives philosophy to metaphorical hyperbole.”

Reflections on play show how the dividing lines between sacred/profane are “not irrevocably fixed,” and how the profane belongs to the religious lifeworld just as much as the sacred. Play allows us to come into contact with this dividing line (which is descriptive of our world-relation), and it allows us to notice how the profane is a kind of “forecourt” or courtyard of the sacred. Without explicit reference to it here, one can assume Fink has in mind the Greek understanding of kosmos, generally interpreted as the order of things for the “world of people,” and as it develops in German cosmology of space, a public “courtyard” (Midgard). This becomes a core intelligibility for “the secular,” with the Greek aion referencing a matter of this world in its spatial and temporal settings, and the Latin saecularis associating such an order of things with an age or period of time.

The remainder of this paper has no other pretense than to describe Fink’s understanding of religion and its most relevant correlates present in Spiel als Weltsymbol. The paper is organized into five sections. 1: An introduction to his phenomenological approach in general (occasionally relying on other works), and description of the role of “play”; 2: investigations into the relation between play and world; 3: a description of his phenomenology of religion; 4: engagements in the idea of cult-play and the sacred sphere, and 5: reflection on his idea of the play of God.

2 Fink’s Phenomenological Approach in General

2.1 Fink’s Phenomenology of Play

There is a very unique indication that lies in play that is world containing and harbors a metaphysically symbolic power. Fink aims a) to retrieve play from

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16 Mercer Ronald L. “Phenomenology and the Possibility of Religious Experience” in Open Theology, vol. 3, no. 1 (2017), 521 and 519 respectively.

17 As Fink continues, “the ‘profane’ is initially the forecourt of the temple where ordinary everyday life surges up to the wall of the sacred but is still strictly separated from it; the name of the forecourt becomes the term for the whole sphere of life from which the sacred precinct was demarcated, against which it is set apart and which it elevates in such a separation. The sacred and the profane realms together constitute for the first time the whole of the religious world; however, the dividing borders between the two zones belonging together are not irrevocably fixed” Fink, Play as Symbol, 186.
the misunderstood description as a mere form of *idleness*, delight, childish activity, or leisurely distanciation from the seriousness of life and work, and b) to draw attention to the critical role play plays in suturing us to the “big questions” of life’s existence. It cannot be overemphasized that Fink frequently bemoans that “play is not at all taken seriously in its own right.” As one gets older “play is ever more displaced from the center of life and is supplanted by other phenomena of existence. Play moves on the periphery of life; it does not completely disappear but acquires the characteristic of being an occasional diversion or restful break.” Fink’s task is not so much simply to determine “why” this is the case, but more importantly, to discern the true role that play can play.

To do so Fink traces out a speculative and positive description of play. Play in general is a metaphor for the cosmic and mystical; it is how ontology works. It thus is poetic and creative, yet also follows the constitutive constraints of conceptual thinking. If we can bracket momentarily the presumption that play is merely about delightful idleness, human play will appear to us as having a “world-significance” that is not obscure or ambiguous, but rather has a unique, “cosmic transparency.” In this bracketing we learn that “while playing, the human being does not remain in himself, does not remain in an enclosed domain of his psychic interiority—rather, he ecstatically steps out of and beyond himself in a cosmic gesture and interprets the whole of the world in a manner that is suffused with sense.” Play follows as a transcendental lever of sorts for reingaging the passive solipsistic subject into the world’s activities. Work has the strange power to make us more passive, in the rote and drone of industry. Play automatically points towards a kind of otherness-relation that saturates the world in which the player creatively finds herself.

2.2 *The Role of Religion in Misunderstandings of Play*

Our inability to understand the fecundity of play in everyday life has certain theological roots, which could be understood in three ways. First, this is in part due to a certain theological heritage that conceives God, and service to God as primarily serious, dutiful work. Exactly how humankind got here is unclear; perhaps it is due to metaphysical presumptions that gradually—to trust Weber’s primary thesis—have disenchanted us over time. The Kantian

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18 Ibid. 36, cf. 78.
19 Ibid.
20 Fink makes this point rather succinctly: “There appears to exists a ‘hostility’ between the image-laden, creative imaginative powers of play and conceptual thought. The human being at play does not think, and the thinking human being does not play.” Ibid., 78.
21 Ibid., 46.
systematization of philosophy depicted the philosophical topics most worthy of contemplation to be God, nature and human freedom. All of which are very serious matters that, in the end, are worked out with fear and trembling, or to borrow from and alter Otto’s language of the construction of religion, as mystерium et tremendum, but lacking in fascinas. For Fink this has had a negative impact on the modern mind, with the vectors of working/seriousness auto-presenting to us what is worthy:

The worthiness of these great topics manifestly marks them off from a general unworthiness of many insignificant and negligible things. In what—so one could now ask—is the difference between the worthy and unworthy grounded?

Play as Symbol, 37

Second, this rhetorical question already gestures towards its answer—a certain theology of work that traffics in theologies of sovereignty and omnipotence. Play, usually associated with childlikeness and frivolity generally gets excluded from any association with power. We thus inherited from the ancients that, in the human being’s “mythical-religious disposition he acquires an evaluation of worldly things as a whole. The status of all things is measured in relation to divine power. What is most powerful is most worthy of veneration.”22 The scale of value is then tipped towards the most powerful, and this has an effect on how we evaluate the world in which we live. Such evaluations lead to the establishment of a not so subtle and stark order of things that should be called into question, precisely because of the flawed, social model it implicitly presents: “Can the hierarchy that exists between things according to variously thought exemplariness of a highest being at all serve as a guiding model to expose, even merely as a question, the historical position of things in relation to the world-totality?”23

Fink later returns to his critique of this “highest being” of metaphysics, and how it demoted the idea of infinity to a theological concept, thus stripping it of its cosmological potential.24 This is not to argue against omnipotence as a

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22 Ibid., 37
23 Ibid., 56.
24 For Fink, “The ‘highest being’ of metaphysical philosophy was called by the name of God. ‘Infinity’ became a theological attribute and lost its primordial cosmic sense. The history of the transformation of world-wisdom into a theologically stamped ontology does not come to an end, however, with the Platonic-Aristotelian foundation of metaphysics, but rather runs through the course of philosophy up to the present day as a latent tension and strive between the world-closure and world-openness of Western thought.” Ibid., 137.
theological attribute of God, but rather to point to how such reflections often have, perhaps inadvertently, foreclosed inquiry into the world. Although he inquires into the metaphysical structure of play and its symbolisms, this is not “theology” for Fink, and such reflection is justified phenomenologically because it deals with the human relation, bracketing the traditional theological question of God’s existence/non-existence. Yet this approach also is more than an anthropology because it goes through Fink’s conceptual and creative apparatus that is irreducible to little formulae of pedantic description. Somewhat bombastically expressed, “Theology has no place within philosophy, insofar as the latter conceives of itself as the finite world-wisdom of the human being.” The entire history of western metaphysics, with its focus on the problem of God “was determined by the suppression of the world-problem” and Fink wishes to refer “to the merely human side of religion and of culture and deliberately brackets the question concerning the existence of the gods or God.” (2016, 145)

Overall, this model of “highest” (and its at times implicit theologies), of hierarchies is not fundamentally accurate in regards to how we experience our everyday life worlds, but rather is more depictive of the world gone wrong (a certain facticity), of either the power-hungry, or of the seekers of unproblematicity in the natural attitude. Surely, there are power structures that run like lines of flight through our social institutions. Yet does such an instantiation allow for the justification to claim that it is a model not only depictive/descriptive of the entire human operation, but also in a way prescriptive? For Fink the answer of course is no, yet there is a failed theological orientation of metaphysics that seeks the sumnum ens, (surely a reflection of Heidegger’s ontotheological critique) one that has contributed a transformation of thinking itself as an ever-directedness towards submitting oneself to the hierarchy of a false absolute.25

Third, Fink refers to the disaster of western metaphysics’ construal of the human as “centauresque,” as always both “half-animal and half-divine.”26 This is disastrous, namely for the human being’s world relation, which gets neglected in favor of thinking the human in terms of its animal-relation or God-relation.27

25 “The history of Western philosophy could be written as a commentary on this thirty-second fragment of Heraclitus, insofar as the primordial openness of human thinking in the world is ever more strongly transformed into the theological orientation to metaphysics and aims at the ‘absolute,’ at the sumnum ens and conceives itself in the most extreme culmination, in Hegel’s philosophy, even as the ‘self-consciousness of God’” Ibid., 57–58.

26 Ibid., 63.

27 “Western metaphysics thinks of the human being as simultaneously half-animal and half-divine. This centauresque basic feature of the traditional image of the human being is a disastrous legacy, inasmuch as human existence’s essential relation to the world was
Although these may be helpful means of describing the human, in the end, it amounts to the problem that the world is overlooked, allowing it to become a neutral theatre of presentation without any phenomenality of its own.

Such centauresqueness reminds that we are not to be ignorant to the fact that avoiding ontotheology may very well lead us back into the mire from which we originally sought to escape. A negative theology that traps description of God or religious experience in the parameters set for it in philosophical approaches lays too much emphasis upon the purely sacred at the expense of the profane, thus obscuring the phenomenality of God all together. Thus, the total eradication of ontotheology leaves us with little to hold onto with the reign of this Deus Absconditus. Instead of our world-relation, we focus only on the human or God-relation. Entirely focused on such a metaphysical God “disguises the world, and he disguises it all the more the further he is moved beyond every grave image, every appearance manifest to the senses, every comprehensibility in the concept” ultimately leading to God’s becoming purely a privation or hiddenness. For Fink, “this holds only for the god of the philosophers, of the metaphysicians—not of the ‘God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob,’ not for Zeus and Apollo.”

What these three aspects of critique of theological metaphysics leads us to take into account is a certain intermittent axis of power-veneration-exemplarity that have commandeered our reflections on religion and our god-relation void of our world-relation. In overemphasizing the need to determine the supreme worthiness of a thing, with solemnity and earnestness, one necessarily seeks to discern a hierarchical, meta-narratival explanation of the origin and meaning of life. Yet this often takes place without any adequate reflection upon “the how” or phenomenality of the world, which gives us a science for better understanding our own humanity.

3 Between Play and World

One of Fink’s motivations in studying play is not simply to understand the subject of play on its own, but rather to discern its cosmological potential to reveal the truth of our relation with the world. Although one might be so inclined to refer to it as such, his approach “is not a ‘phenomenology’ of play, but rather
the world-significance of play, the recognition of play as a key phenomenon of a truly universal status.”

There are two ways to interpret play’s symbolism, both in its status as “important,” and as how it “signifies” the world itself, which we generally presume to be a neutral, non-entity, a kind of empty theatre upon which our lives play out, holding our lives together and bringing unity to our duration, our space-time relation. This play is applicable not only as a metaphorical symbol, but as a form of Offenbarkeit or manifestation to characterize “the course of the world.”

Not only is play an “intense mode” of how we relate with the world; in order to understand play in any sense, necessary is an acquaintance with, or deeper insight into, the world. This certainly is reminiscent of Schelling’s engagement with the world-whole ontology in Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom. It was there that the non-grounding (Ungrund) becomes a means by which we can know something about the world (although disparagement is cast upon a certain “ontology” of this world-whole). Fink certainly is not ignorant of this history, and he thus turns to what he finds to be a certain connective tissue between the world and us—play.

Although Fink decidedly is a phenomenologist, he insists again that “world-play is no phenomenon. One cannot point it out or make it the object of a scientific method of research.” Instead, play is a speculative symbol used to “interpret” or read through in order to detect how the world works (its “total movements”). There is a certain “transference” of the structures of human-play, and world-play; that is, human-play gives us one piece to the bigger puzzle of how the world operates. But we must become “… expressly conscious of the difference between an innerworldly thing and the world itself.”

When Fink says “symbol” he means a certain transfer of meaning of one thing into another, which is the result of the combining and intermingling of signs that are creative poetically. Play is Fink’s metasymbol that allows us to “perhaps achieve” what it takes to juxtapose human being and world.

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30 Ibid., 71.
31 Ibid., 77.
32 Yet “In order to understand play we must be acquainted with the world, and in order to understand the world as play we must achieve a still much deeper insight into the world.” Fink conceives of “play as an especially intense mode of the human relation to the world.” Ibid., 52.
33 Ibid., 43. “In the end nothing is accomplished by our distinguishing human play and world-play, the one designated as a phenomenon, the other as a speculative thought.” It isn’t that we can go from the essence to the existence, from over-arching world to understanding all things, but rather, and especially in “a discussion of play we perhaps achieve the conceptual resources to think and conceive primordially the difference and belong together of the human being and the world.”
"Perhaps" here because it is speculative, non-empirical, and never-appearing. Yet world-play is a primordial intuition that depicts the Gegebenheit of things, or as Fink interprets Heraclitus, is a kind of ur-phenomenon that “is what ultimately gives, the Omni-potent, which brings all beings to pass, granting them place and duration.”  

3.1 The Intra-worldly and Innerworldly
This leads to the essential distinction between intra-worldly, and inner-worldly: to summarize, intraworldly refers to any thing, and innerworldly refers to humankind: “1. All things in general are intraworldly—or the Being of all existing things must be conceived as being-in-the-world; 2. the human being is the innerworldly thing that exists in an ecstatic relation to the totality of the world, is addressed by the universe and is turned toward it with understanding...”

Finite things can at times flare up in “intraworldliness,” and this is when philosophy “as world-wisdom awakens”; when this intraworldliness refers to the world-whole despite its fragmentary character.

As for the inner-worldly, since the human being is surrounded by other human beings who also are innerworldly, also co-constituting the world, the human being is ever engulfed by both sameness and difference that conditions them “by the universal ontological constitution of things (Dinge).” The innerworldly human being is connected to “the world-totality,” and here one has full license, despite any potential hesitation, to read Fink through a Hegelian lens: the human being is a part to the whole of the world-totality, and the human being does not simply live within the world-totality or field as if it is a “frame” or “container” for its many things:

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35 “The play of the world does not appear anywhere or at any time among things. Does this play, then, of which Heraclitus speaks, not at all exist? Is it an arbitrary dream of thought, "That Heraclitus’ world-play does not appear anywhere at any time among given things has its basis in the fact that it is what ultimately gives, the Omni-potent, which brings all beings to pass, granting them place and duration." Ibid., 51.

36 Ibid., 65.

37 Ibid., 128.

38 Ibid., 47. “The human being as an innerworldly being is also determined in his connections and relation to other innerworldly beings surrounding him by this interweaving of ‘sameness’ and ‘difference’ and is ‘conditioned [be-dingt]’ by the universal ontological constitution of things (Dinge). But the question remains whether such a conditioning of the human being determines him fully and exclusively—or whether he is still not stamped in his essence by another heterogeneous connection, namely by his connection to the world-totality."
Beings are not positioned in the world like a worm in an apple or gold in the bank. All well-known and familiar modes of the being-in of things in greater things surrounding them cannot be applied to things’ being in the universe or a fortiori to the being-in of the human being, who understands Being in the ontological whole of the world.

*Play as Symbol, 47*

Although the being-in of things or objects may help depict material everyday life and its general forms of phenomenal presentation, we are not in the world in the way that objects are, and we thus need a different means of understanding the human-world relation.

3.2 *The Actual vis-à-vis the Real and the Problem of Western Metaphysics*

Despite play not being a “phenomenal” object, Fink is adamantly resistant to, and wishes to contrast his work against the backdrop of the false claims that: a) the playworld isn’t “real” (non-actual) and b) that play is a mere repetitive reproduction of the actual. This is in order to show how play instead has a productive, symbolically fecund role that reveals something about the world-human relation. In a nutshell, “we must attempt to free ourselves from the traditional condemnation of play as mere reproduction of ‘actuality.’”39 In phenomenology, “actuality” is not a visible force or phenomenon, but rather an uncaused movement that actualizes in activities, behaviors, and fantasies. This false characterization of play as non-actual amounts to a privation of play entirely.40

Such a concern is traceable back to Plato’s critique of the non-actuality of the playworld, and how it is in fact “reproduction” that in some respects is the kernel of the problem. Plato determined all images to be mere reproductions41 or simulacra, illusions like a hall of mirrors for entertainment through repetition with subtle variation. Non-actuality here is a kind of “enigmatic something” that is not like actual things, but also is not “nugatory” like delusions and

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39 Ibid., 125. “Non-actuality” of play world is of its own kind. It is more than a primordial reproduction of “innerworldly processes and events, a repetition and imitation.” Ibid., 127. Fink reiterates this point again 8 pages later: “metaphysical philosophy all the way back to its beginning judged play—and it has passed judgment on it as a ‘mere reproduction.’” Ibid., 134.

40 “The ‘non-actual’ as the simple antonym of the ‘actual’ is indeed that which is utterly nugatory, that which is not at all.” Ibid., 79.

41 Ibid., 127.
hallucinations. Plato, known for his critique of the poets for whom play was a lighthearted idleness inferior to work, saw it only as a means of recovering from the real mess of life. Play, already in Plato, is but a coping mechanism for impotence or exhaustion. These reflections on play allow for a more thorough understanding of Fink’s work on religion.

4 Fink’s Phenomenology of Religion

Fink seeks to address the phenomena of religion without falling into theology, yet also to say something meaningfully relevant about theological and religious life that perhaps a theologian, according to her own “ontic” devices, could not arrive at on her own. This approach is a bracketing out of the theological question, not because theology is irrelevant or insufficient, but because there is so much within everyday life that can tell us about religion and our experiences with/of God: “With the bracketing out of the theological question, cult-play already came into our view in an abridged form; it had revealed itself to us only as an anthropological phenomenon.” Before turning to Fink’s understanding of cult-play, it is helpful to first see his means of understanding it or trying to grasp it in its essentiality. It is his approach to play as a symbol and not a phenomenon that demonstrates one aspect of his distinction from both Husserl and Heidegger. And religion, which is essential to play (namely, cult-play), plays a role in charting a solution to the metaphysical problems of a disenchanted world. We turn to religion, (or in particular what he calls cult) because it retains a cultic response that “belongs already to a stance of existence that is determined by a curious world-oblivion.” World-oblivion is a way of describing the covering over, or a kind of Weltvergessenheit that is a negative sociality or consequence of our often-implicit metaphysical commitments.

Further, (and in recalling the critique of the limiting the study of human-kind as centauresque) religious experience must be understood to involve a

42 Concerning Plato’s critique of ‘non-actuality,’ Fink wonders if ‘this non-actuality grasped decisively when it is taken as a reproduction? That is the question that concerns us. ‘Non-actuality’ here does not mean ‘non-being,’ as probably everyone will acknowledge, does not mean a sheer nothing, but rather an enigmatic something, which does not exist like customary existing things but is also not nugatory like a hallucination or a merely subjective delusion.” Ibid., 125.

43 As Fink critiques, for Plato play is inferior to work, “struggle and love, for instance. It becomes a way to ‘recover’ from the ways in which life is difficult and grave.” Ibid., 134.

44 Ibid., 178.

45 Ibid., 134.
two-part or two-sided relation with the Divine: a “comportment” of the human to the divine, and a comportment of the divine to the human. Overemphasizing the human relation leaves a description of religious experience trapped in a solipsistic theatre of human consciousness, as merely behavioristic and psychologistic: “… to only take into account philosophically what religion for its part recognizes as the human side of its essence, if one leaves out of consideration everything that concerns the divine and the gods and keeps silent about them out of reverence, then not much remains for philosophy in religion than an odd psychology.”

Investigations of religion thus need to be distinct from psychological description, theological conception, and anthropological distanciation. Religion, however, is not merely a topic of interest for Fink, but also is part and parcel of his critique and solution to describing the role of play in regards to western metaphysics, and as noted by Moran, “there is as well (despite itself) a certain almost religious fervor to his writing.” Or as Crowell has diagnosed, the gnostic aspects of Fink’s work point to human relation with the world as one of a struggle, despite the lack of a soteriological or eschatological hope in life after-the-world. Fink’s upbringing certainly had something to do with his interest in religion and its role. His uncle, a priest and keeper of a well-stocked library, helped raise him, even sometimes taking him on clerical visits to the sick. His brother, Karl August Fink, would go on to become a prominent Catholic theologian and historian. Thus well aware of the concerns of the Christian theological tradition, Fink tries to engage religion by avoiding anthropology, theology, and psychology by leveraging his notion of play as a tool for exfoliating other aspects of religion’s essential truth.

46 “Religion appears to be divided into two sides, the incommensurability of what presents the genuine miracle of religious existence. The human being comports himself to the divine, and the divine comports itself to human beings. Now, if one makes the cut in such a way as to only take into account philosophically what religion for its part recognizes as the human side of its essence, if one leaves out of consideration everything that concerns the divine and the gods and keeps silent about them out of reverence, then not much remains for philosophy in religion than an odd psychology.” Ibid., 139.
47 Dermot Moran, “Fink’s Speculative Phenomenology: Between Constitution and Transcendence” in Research in Phenomenology, 37 (2007), 30.
48 See here Steven Galt Crowell, “Gnostic Phenomenology: Eugen Fink and the Critique of Transcendental Reason,” The New Yearbook for Phenomenology and Phenomenological Philosophy 1 (2001), 257–77.
4.1 Sublimations of the Secular: Play and Religion as Opposed to Work and Religion

The truth of religion raises the question of how such truth might be attained, if we might even consider such truth as “attainable” or containable in any traditional, philosophical sense. Here Fink turns to a period of history (pre-antiquity) when belief in Demons, God(s), and devils was not the deviation, but the norm. Those who believed in gods and demons knew of their own helplessness in ever winning a battle against them, no matter how much one strives, toils, or works. As St. Paul proclaimed, good works do not bring about salvation. Similarly, fear of demons cannot be broken down by work or toil in the everyday. Only play, as a form of subversion of what is malevolent, can purify the soul of dark forces—“One cannot battle with daemons and one cannot break their resistance by working. But the activity that one for the most part regards as the least serious and that one commonly believes to have no power, namely, play, becomes the sole possibility for the human being to counteract the magic power of the daemons or to turn their malevolence around.”

Returning to 20th century social reflection, religion far too often is understood in its “work” and “labor” elements. Fink thus seeks to demonstrate play as essentially operative within religion, and as a certain solution to contemporary social problems. One might here note the bemoaning (e.g. of Weber at the turn of the century) of the outgrowth of a strange secularism that deprives us of imagination, and enframes and industrializes our minds without transcendental wonder. There has been a “dismantling of the religious interpretation of human life and a progressive decline of mythical substance” despite religion still being a potentially volatile and life-giving source today. Instead of a wholesale “end” of religion, or more accurately a certain “religious fervor,” it instead has been rechanneled into the obsession of the day: economy, which concerns “the explication and the proper ordering of the productive forces moving the course of history” and has “drawn to itself the most intimate interests of the human being, which otherwise were worked out in religion.”

49 Fink, Play as Symbol, 51.
50 For Fink, “at the same time there is a dismantling of the religious interpretation of human life and a progressive decline of mythical substance. Certainly, the process of the dwindling of religion has not yet reached its dismal end; powerful life energies still exist in the great religions present today—but the decisive controversy, which cuts humanity in two, revolves around the interpretation of the economic process, around the explication and the proper ordering of the productive forces moving the course of history. This controversy is carried out with religious fervor, or better: it has drawn to itself the most intimate interests of the human being, which otherwise were worked out in religion. One can even formulate the global controversy as follows: it is not at all the case that both
formulate the global controversy as follows: it is not at all the case that both world-political camps are only distinguished by their conceptions of the economic process, of the regulation of the economy..."\(^{51}\) In other words, religion (as a kind of energy source) has been sublimated into various other sources of human engagement, to the point that societies no longer are distinguished by their religious differences, but rather their "economical" forms, regulations, and processes. "Capital" or economical gain, as Benjamin also knew, has taken on a religious structure with cult like dimensions (devoid of dogma) that auto-reject the non-economic as void of meaning; with a totality of capitalism that is timeless, and whose Godlike indivisibility is not fully developed and in need of expansion and even evolution.\(^{52}\)

This demonstrates that Fink is really trying to point to something different when he engages phenomenology to address religion, not in a dogmatic way, not in a traditional "philosophy of religion" way either. For example, in the case of God, such a phenomenology points to "the phenomena of belief and disbelief. 'Full of gods' and 'empty of gods' are meant as anthropological expressions."\(^{53}\) The "masters of suspicion" were known to critique the anthropocentricism of theology with God being "a dreamed-up likeness of the human being" that originated in the "wishful fancies of human beings." Other approaches of Fink's contemporaries employed a "modern critique of religion to leave the structure of 'transcendence' to the divine and precisely to derive it, with all its transcendence, from an illusory self-externalization and self-alienation of the human being."\(^{54}\) This is a certain secularization of transcendence, but in a way that still deserves critique for it pays little attention to the world.

Religion helps us understand play, and play is a key to grasping the world. This is the way Fink phenomenologically investigates religion, not by acting

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51 Ibid., 179.
52 See Walter Benjamin, "Capitalism as Religion," *Selected writings. Volume 1*, 1913–1926 eds. Marcus Paul Bullock and Michael William Jennings (Cambridge: Belknap, 2004).
53 "Such a way of speaking is easily misunderstood. No dogmatic claims about the object of religion are intended to be made here. We are not saying that there were gods in archaic human existence and that there are no longer gods in modern human existence. Fink, *Play as Symbol*, 179.
54 "The truth of religion would be the human being. The human being would not be an im-age, a likeness of God, but God a dreamed-up likeness of the human being. It is an old feature of religious critique to explain the gods from out of the wishful fancies of human beings; it is, however, a more recent feature of the modern critique of religion to leave the structure of 'transcendence' to the divine and precisely to derive it, with all its transcendence, from an illusory self-externalization and self-alienation of the human being." Ibid., 181.
as if “the world” is antithetical to religious signification, but precisely the opposite: the world is suffused with a religious sense and potential fervor to the point that this fervor tells us about the world itself:

The bracketing out of the religious significations does not leave behind a kind of play that would be lacking in significance; sacred cult-play does not become ‘worldly’ through a methodical dimming of its religious motifs—at most it thereby becomes ‘profane.’ the profanation of cult-play is a process that comes about in a variety of ways in the history of culture.

*Play as Symbol*, 183–4

However, this is not to be equated with any of his contemporaries’ reflections on the profane as “anti-religious” or “worldly.”

5 Cult-Play and the Sacred Sphere

This theory of religion gets developed in a kind of juxtaposition or strange historical genealogy of religion in early-antiquity and contemporary reflection, the “results” of which culminate in a development of “cult-play.” Cult-play is qualified as: “a kind of play before God, consecration and activity, archaic practice of enchantment, mantic jointing of the human realm with the heavenly powers of fate—is an elevated, solemn, and festive association of the human race with the divine. The intimate binding of religion and play belongs to the wonderful and primordial mysteries of early human existence.” This is in contradistinction to certain 20th century societies “saturated with the droning of motors, with the workshop din of our technological civilization, with the battle cry of ideologies and with the hectic bustle of our businesses.”

A juxtaposition between the archaic practices and contemporary liturgies can lead us to bemoan the loss of the latter, which were responses to the constant bewilderment of the mysteries of Being. Irrespective of these cultural divisions, cult and religion still survive. “Cult” is significant because it is not overwrought with “work,” yet simultaneously is not easily reducible to operating with a “lack of seriousness.” It thus instantiates quite well what Fink wants to symbolize with play. Cult maintains a play that is operative in “the urgent, uncanny, and spellbinding basic feature of enchantment, the rapture that

55 “The human being of late culture has only sparse memories of this prehistory, when all was still full of gods; they are submerged memories in the collective unconscious that light up from time to time, flash like lightning in our mundane day. Ibid., 178.
removes the human being from his everyday straightforwardness and fixed determinacy.”56

The question of the cult-play relation is an intriguing one in Spiel als Weltsymbol in part because, on the one hand Cult is praised as a means of re-enchantment, and on the other hand Cult is conceived as a human strategy that is not primordially sutured to play. Fink’s dream (in a way surely affected by his time with Heidegger, and their co-taught seminars on Heraclitus) of a cultless time (which is not to be understood negatively, but simply as a historical fact) can be understood in two aspects. First there once was a golden age in which there was no cult or any need of cult. This is because “all things were still world-profound” with mundane things being “full of gods.” It was only in the passing of time that we have become increasingly disenchanted with the world, in part due to our preoccupations with our own cultivations, i.e. with ourselves and our own achievements, from the splitting of the atom bomb to the great space race. There is a kind of exploitation of the world’s resources for our own benefit (here we can be reminded of Heidegger’s Gestell or enframing). It was only after that we “thought and felt according to custom ... did it become the task of a special praxis to break through...”57

Cult thus is a kind of countering of trivialization and banalization via a differentiation of customs towards the outside of the human, and it begins in “the demarcation of the sacred sphere.”58 These depictions of the growth of cult and myth are situated according to ancient Greece, and it was there that one might observe this carving out of the sacred that also creates, vicariously, the profane. Profane things operate as proxies for the sacred, as the cult consecrates (via the sacred/profane division) particular profane, everyday things to act on behalf of the sacred. 59 The play of relation between profane and earthly things helps keep the relation to the sacred alive.

56 For Fink, “the cult is a distinctive phenomenon of life in which play precisely does not occur in the all-too-popular and all-too-familiar character of the ‘playful’ and is not revealed as ‘a lack of seriousness’ or as ‘idle’...” Ibid., 177
57 “If ever a golden age existed in the dawning morning of the human race, then this race had no cult, because all things were still world-profound, because the shimmering of the farthest stars lay on each blade of grass and everything was full of gods. Only when in the course of time things were exploited, when human beings cultivated their customs and thought and felt according to custom ... did it become the task of a special praxis to break through...” Ibid., 129.
58 Ibid.
59 “The sacred things of the cult, whether they be the temple precinct, the priest, the altar... the consecrated bread, operate on the whole, vicariously for profane things: for the house of the human being, for his dinner table, for the wine that he dinks and the bread that he eats.” Ibid., 130. Cultic consecration divides sacred and profane things in order to
As for the second aspect, the cult is a “a derivative comportment of the human race, the recollection of a world-relation that was not yet determined by the distinction between the sacred and the profane and by the human being’s conscious distance from the gods. The cult seeks to retrieve, to restore the world-relation, but it is capable of such restoration only in a mediated way: precisely in the elevation of a few things that it wrests into an in-finite significance.” Here one is reminded of the Eucharistic transubstantiation of the bread and the wine. They become the elevation of a just a few, even banal things in Christian liturgy. In fact, it is precisely their banality that helps us take note of the reality that the world is transfixed, as is all experience, with the necessary limitations of distance/time, thus absolving us of any myth that the world itself ever is immediately present.

This development is as enigmatic as it is intriguing, and raises the question of the role philosophy is to play. Cult is not merely derivative from philosophy or thinking, and it is not simply a conjured response to the trivialization of the world. This claim also could be understood to have two aspects. First, and in fact, “the cult however is older than philosophy. Before human beings were able to think in a rigorous way ... they beheld in images that which is ... what their task on earth was, their fate and their purpose.” “Images” here do not refer to idols or icons or representations of Gods as Abbilder or non-actual representations of something already known and understood otherwise without these “images.’ Instead, the beholding of images in the cult is poetic, creative, and co-constitutive to the point that cult instead involves thought that is pre-reflective and therefore pre-philosophical.61
And second, part and parcel of the cult’s being primordial or pre-philosophical is founded its relation with play (as a non-toiling activity). The cult is not composed of abstract beliefs, per se, but liturgical-like practices, such as consecration or proclamation. For example, “Consecration is determined by play and play by consecration.”62 As an act, “the cult is always also a making-known, a life-teaching, proclamation. Proclamation is not thereby restricted to the word. It is not confined to the transmission of knowledge by the discourse that imparts. In the realm of the sacred, discourse has a peculiar powerlessness and impotence.”63

Another essential aspect of cult-play concerns how its acts help in masking a thing and its becoming-multifarious: “the mask is not a plaything...but rather something in which one plays, something that constitutes cultic play in the very first place.”64 This enchantment, one might begin to think, is a form of mythification, or fashioning an imaginative illusion. However, such illusion would be misleading. Indeed, the mask is “not supposed to mislead” but “to enchant,” and this also points out how play is not in solitaire, but community. It is a kind of participation, not entirely unlike that which John Milbank recently decried to be an “ontology of violence” that put an end to divine participatory ontology. By masking one attempts to participate in the enchantment for the sake of the community, “the incomprehensible transformative power of daemons,” and to breach the “inescapable fixity and rigidity of our life’s situation. One can be everything again.”65 This amounts to a cancellation not of only life’s rigidity, but also its simplicity by the differentiation and multiplication of real possibilities (again, not non-actualities). This masking raises one, through play, to the level of the superhuman or daemonic.

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62 “The cult is not merely ‘primordial’ in its religious aspect but also in its playful aspect. Here, not only is play ‘consecrated’; ‘consecration’ is also played. Consecration and play permeate one another in the phenomenon of the archaic cult in an almost indissoluble intimacy.” Ibid., 170.

63 Ibid., 170.

64 Ibid., 151.

65 For Fink, “One wants to appear multifarious for oneself; one wants with the mask to enter into the magic spell of the daemonic, to participate in a minor way in the incomprehensible transformative power of daemons. The mask is not supposed to mislead; it is supposed to enchant. To a certain degree the mask releases us from the inescapable fixity and rigidity of our life’s situation. One can be everything again.” Such a polysemy takes place “in the masking, in the cancellation of simplicity, and in the passage to a multifariousness of existence. As a player the human being becomes more powerfully and essentially commensurate with the superhuman daemons...” Ibid., 162.
Yet it bears reiteration (as Fink does time and again), the cult is a means of getting at the *most genuine* actuality and reality, the “really real,” not the illusory. For “the activity of enchantment is just as much intimation as it is imitation; it represents, yet not in a way a reproduction represents an original, but rather in the way a part represents the whole.”\(^6^6\) The Non-actual becomes a unique breach for a deeper and more real actuality.

5.1 *Cult Play as a Solution to the Problem of Non-actuality of Play*

Religious Cult-play teaches us that play is not a leisurely activity, but is in fact more serious than what we tend to think is serious. Cult-play’s “non-actuality” is experienced as an entry point to a more genuine actuality. These are features of the greatest significance for understanding play.\(^6^7\) Cult-play helps deconstruct the “idleness” understanding of play, rendering it absurdly over simplistic, presenting something seriously significant—such as God’s very phenomenality—and shows how enchantment is a key to accessing this reality. This often runs contrary to the modern understanding, which is precisely the opposite, with the really-real being the *Ursprung* of an enchanting playworld.

These two stages of cult-play (the enchantment of masks; cult-play as magical technique) are supplemented by a third: the festival play of a cultic community. This “festival play can assume a variety of forms,” whether as sacred activity of consecration; service to god in great ritual that affords spectators a sight that enchants, or it can be a “trustful attempt to invite the gods to partake in fellowship to produce a community of mortals and immortals in the joy of the feast.”\(^6^8\)

Yet overall, cult-play breaks the chains of the rote and drone of the natural attitude, of one damn thing after another, of illusory representation supposedly based in an imitation of reality. Simulacra produced by a previous ones is part and parcel a problem of the association between work/seriousness and holy/religion. Play becomes serious because it furnishes connectivity to the world and detaches one from mere repetition and illusion. Thus, play does precisely the opposite of what, in everyday life, we tend to think. We could here interpret Fink to be leading us to the point of recognizing a certain deceptive,

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\(^6^6\) Ibid.

\(^6^7\) Fink continues, “We need cult-play in order to pose our problem, because in it play is experienced as the most serious seriousness; its ‘non-actuality’ is experienced as an entry point to a more genuine actuality. These are features of the greatest significance for understanding play. And, furthermore, cult-play in a peculiar way dissembles the play of the prevailing world, insofar as it allows the governance of the gods to ‘appear,’ sometimes even as a kind of play.” Ibid., 163.

\(^6^8\) Ibid., 163.
unholy alliance between representation, copies, imitations, and the seriousness of the seemingly holy and dogmatic. Play is the unconditioned that breaks this alliance and de-conditions its hegemony. Seriousness and strictness/rigidity are being fully industrialized and it seems only play can save us now.

6 The Play of God

As for salvation, the gods are not exactly trafficking in that sort of thing, at least when it comes to someone earning their place among the gods. Work is useless in the religion battle because work is repetitive and merely the attempt to make oneself enchanting for the God’s entertainment. Instead, play points us to the interaction with God, whose primary activity is playful. This of course raises a host of questions: is there a reduction of religion to work in a modern-industrial paradigm? And can this reduction (religion = work) be a primary ground for 20th century war-mongering? This is at least one conclusion one might draw from Fink here, for work is struggle, a conflict, a battle with the elements, and religion has become an instrument of warring (naturally Fink is well versed in Heraclitus’s theory of conflict). One need only think of the creation/fall narrative of Genesis, of God condemning man to toil with the earth. We take this model and apply it to religion and think that we achieve something by work alone. Holiness generally is understood as serious work! And this furnishes us some means of understanding Fink when he concludes that: “perhaps even that which, in an everyday manner, we call ‘play’ and contrast disparagingly with serious areas of life is already a fallen mode of an erstwhile primordial state.” That is, the play of leisure, of pastime and of seeing it as non-productive, as a privation of activity, and as a form of non-real imitation, is a consequence of being among the fallen.

Ancient civilizations all operated with the foreknowledge and presupposition that they were powerless against gods and daemons. They shuddered before the possibility of losing their crops, of droughts, of cataclysmic failures out of their control. This taught them that struggle and work are useless against a superior force. (“all his exertions can, so he believes, come to ruin through the disfavor of daemons.” What the gods and daemons do with human beings is play: “We could characterize this effortless, arbitrary, and unpredictable association of daemonic powers with human beings most readily as a game. They

69 Ibid., 141.
70 Ibid., 169.
71 Ibid., 141.
play with us. We are like marionettes in their hands; we are their powerless playthings.”72

Thus instead of toiling against the gods, when the human plays she is able to enter into the gods’ unique kind of phenomenality: For the “more restricted, dangerous, and even exhilarating association with superhuman powers when he disguises and masks himself, relinquishes the obviousness of his existence, slips into the polysemy of the mask—when he participates in the daemonic power as a player, becomes himself the enchanter.”73 Their kind of play is free and unbounded.74 This certainly does not mean that the gods present themselves as phenomena. Recalling here Fink’s interest in the “Absolute,” God (here conceived in the singular) cannot be accessed or correlated noematically or given description, for this would entail a “true theogony,” an accessing the birth of God, the “un-nihilating of the Absolute,” what Bruzina refers to as a “meontic paradox.”75 Yet whenever one engages in play (human play as a metaphor for the gods’ play), the player is enraptured and intimately intertwined with those whom one is playing, and thus “the player does not relate to his plaything with the sovereign distance of the ruler, but rather is captivated by his plaything, fascinated by it and bound by it, as it were.”76

Humankind struggles, works, and dies. The gods play. It is not that God/the gods do not work, but that the gods’ work is play (the gods’ “play at love, work,
and struggle."). The way, appearance, type, or kind of play the gods employ, or that characterize God's acts most fundamentally, is the same way, appearance, type, or kind of play that characterizes our relation with the world, as "the truth of the play of the gods is the play of the world."\(^7\) Our engagement in the place and time in the cosmos of activity (as our shared time and duration in this world, *Saeculum*), and the means by which it comes about, is playful. In part, this is because "play is thus what appears to be raised up above all human measure into the super-human."\(^8\) When we play we take on an attitude in regards to our work that the gods' employ, the play motif, which transcends the innerworldly and says something about gods, totalities, and perhaps most importantly, the world in which we find ourselves.

The idea that gods play, or even that we are the gods' play things certainly is nothing new, and as already mentioned, Fink takes Plato to task for conceiving play as but an idle coping mechanism or illusion. When applied to the gods this certainly is lacking in specificity. Instead, the gods do not simply play games, but indeed struggle, experience pain, and work. And central to all of these activities still is play, and this is why "play is thus what appears to be raised up above all human measure into the super-human."\(^9\) Gods that don't play and dance (think here Nietzsche and Heidegger) are dead gods, or gods unworthy of adoration, respect, or praise. Although Plato refers to the human as a plaything of God, a *paignion* theou, such play gets moralized. As God's plaything, under Plato's conception, man can only toil under the all-seeing, omnipotent eye of God watching over us. This leaves the acts of man to be unfree, derivative, and therefore a kind of non-actual representation. Play-before-God as cultic derivation is to be overcome because it does not allow immediate access to the world.\(^8\)

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\(^7\) "The play motif in cultic play first attains its more profound significance when it is referred to the totality and therefore 'transcends' innerworldly processes." Ibid., 169.

\(^8\) Ibid., 144.

\(^9\) Ibid. As Fink put it earlier, "Love, work, and struggle—as depicted in the myths of the gods—are rather a kind of pastime; indeed, we can say, a kind of play. The gods play, they live in blessed leisure, they not only play games, they also play at love, work, and struggle." Earlier Fink claims in somewhat Nietzschean fashion, "there is no wickeder, more deadly poison than that of the dead gods. Like a dreadful symbol, therefore, is Nietzsche's lament of Ariadne over the god of play. The herald of the 'death of God' entered into the night with the formula 'Dionysus versus the crucified.'" Ibid., p 140.

\(^8\) "... but Plato moralizes this play. Plato wants a 'purification of the representation of God'." Ibid., 149 and 52. See here Plato, *Laws II 644d VII 803c*. Fink continues, "but the representation that the human being lives under the eyes of God ... in front of his invisible observation, always has a superhuman observer...has remained preserved up to the most sublime
After all, were human activity merely derivative of the gods then why, in the end, would the god’s play back? What would be of intrigue about mere illusory performance that already originates in them, without any human creative poiesis? While human play becomes, in the Platonic model, a performance for God, a “play before God,” under Fink’s hands play is along with God/gods, a creative-active playing back. Here Fink uses Plato against Plato, discrediting his theory of play, but repairing it in order to maintain a platonic theory of reason as a human activity: “Reason is not the cold, pale light that appears to an anemic, withered humanity cut off from the authentic experiences of existence; it is the most passionate passion and the wildest desire, thoroughly aglow with Eros down to its roots, as Plato’s dialogues show”81 (2016, 52). Or as Fink puts it elsewhere, “philosophy is the manifestation of God in us.”82

God’s unencumbered play is cheerful, and mankind’s cultic-play is not merely imitative of it, or interpretative of it, but indeed is constructive of God’s play because cultic-play “sets the play of the gods into the visibility of the scene, lets them become manifest in regard to their essence, in their inconceivable, effortless success.”83 Here Fink reveals his Nietzschean hand, showing that we should be more like the gods, who play without moral responsibility to equivocate between good and evil, and effortlessly to play for plays own sake (“with no ends that lie outside it”).84 The gods are omnipotent not simply due to power or might, but because they out-smart us and prevail to rule over us because their ways are higher than our ways. Cult-play helps reveal and highlight the how or phenomenality of the gods’ prevailing in their actions that obliterate how we understand both “work” and “play,” and this is because their actions can be qualified with an “effortlessness, groundlessness, and the impossibility of resistance.”85 Cult-play is a religious phenomenon insofar as it brings humans into contact with the Archimedean point of activity that makes them forms. As long as this representation prevails, all human play is reinforced in its cultic derivation, is a kind of play before God, is not yet immediately world.” Ibid., 149. 

81 Ibid., 52.
82 Fink continues “God is not a transcendent idol, but rather is the me-ontic depth of the world and existence.” Fink, (from Aus Mappe Z-IV 36a. 19) quoted by Mercer Ronald L. “Phenomenology and the Possibility of Religious Experience” in Open Theology, vol. 3, no. 1 (2017), 519.
83 Ibid., 174.
84 For Fink, “this life of the gods that is blessed with play [spielselig] has no ends that lie outside it—it knows only internal ends for play, which the gods posit just as easily as they again annull. Their activity is ‘without responsibility,’ is ‘beyond good and evil,’ is—to speak with Nietzsche’s Zarathustra—“a wheel rolling out of itself.” Ibid., 175.
85 Supported by Fink, “Cult-play brings to presence the prevailing of the gods and interrupts this ‘prevailing’ as a super-human rule or as a super-human work; in both interpretations
free—play. This can be interpreted not as an ontic, but as an ontological and dynamic, *I play therefore I am*.

7 Conclusion

The aims of this paper, by necessity of limiting its length, were to give description and clarification to Fink’s understanding of religion in *Spiel als Weltsymbol*. Whether or not this approach is worthy of more attention, or is derivative of other thinkers (one could here go into much greater comparative detail regarding Heraclitus, Nietzsche, Heidegger or Gadamer on *Spiel* and *Spielraum*) will be left to further studies. To my estimation, Fink’s originality broadly consists in his depiction of Religion as in fact question-worthy and thought-worthy, in part because, in borrowing Fink’s language, it helps call into question (much like philosophy) the very notion of *worthiness* and thoughtfulness, which are “not decided in advance” but prove themselves “in thought that questions.”

86 And play helps to scandalize the religious approaches that have gone before us that interpret religious life “as akin or a prototype of work.” 87 Cult play is a concept that teaches us that to play is to attempt not simply to *imitate* the gods (because this would fall back into the core problematic that Fink reiterates over and over, that play is mere repetition), but to have relation with gods via play. To play-back-with-God because God’s work is play, holiness remains a matter of playing with God to become God-like. In this sense, Fink’s work perhaps inadvertently teaches us about the core of Christianity—to become holy, and to participate in the kingdom of God. There, everyone has a role to play. Yet, according to Jesus, who were the ones to inherit the kingdom? It decidedly was not those who embraced holiness in training to become like god through repetition or imitation, but rather the children. And children, as we all know, are the quintessential archetypes of play. Some 500 odd years before Jesus, it was Heraclitus who made a similar claim: “*Aion Pais esti Paizon, peteuevo*; rule and work come into an astounding proximity to play, above all through the features of effortlessness, groundlessness, and the impossibility of resistance.”

86 Ibid., 176.

87 As Fink claims, “one attempts to ‘interpret’ religion from out of work not by interpreting religion as akin or a prototype of work, but rather by ‘applying’ the schema of the self-objectification and self-externalization of human freedom achieved in work to religion. One then says: the human being in the religious attitude of life first of all forms the dimension of the scared, which eh then populates with the creatures of his subconscious imagination ...” Ibid., 180–181.
paidos he besileie."88 Eternity, or as Fink renders it, the “course of the world” (Weltlauf) is ‘like a child playing a game ... the kingdom belongs to the child.”89

Acknowledgment

This article was made possible due to the generous support of two research grants from the Austrian Science Fund (FWF). It was conceived within the framework of the project ‘Secularism and its Discontents. Toward a Phenomenology of Religious Violence’ [P 29599], and concluded within the project “Revenge of the Sacred: Phenomenology and the Ends of Christianity in Europe” [P 31919].

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88 Heraclitus, quoted by Eugen Fink, in Nietzsche’s Philosophy (London: Bloomsbury, 2003), 32.

89 Fink, Play as Symbol, 51.
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