

## THE ORACLE, THE ORDEAL AND THE BET

### I

Any classification of games, no matter how determined and what principle of division is chosen, reveals an irreducible category: games of chance. This does not mean that this category is destitute of ambiguity. Because, after all, is it sufficient for chance to play a part in such recreational activity and thus transform it into a game of chance? We can investigate the nature of chance, the part it must play and the extent of its role. It is rather clear that in many games one can discern an element of chance, without this being enough to define these games as games of chance.<sup>1</sup> The chess-player who develops a system of attack cannot

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<sup>1</sup> *Omnis definitio in jure periculosa*. The jurists hesitate. The law in its desire to destroy the game, at least where it is not allowed, is benevolent towards "learned" forms of leisure such as bridge or *belote*, but on condition that no money is used, or rather that public morality not be tarnished by risking cash stakes in public. The same law considers roulette and baccarat in all forms as games of chance which is corroborated by a quite reasonable conviction: that, without a stake, these amusements would be perfectly silly. A long series of legal decisions results however in a confused notion: games of chance would be only those games in which intelligence has no part (as

take into account all the possibilities of his antagonist's reply. He is naturally inclined to speculate on a partially fortuitous future and to rely on a certain amount of "good luck: " *si fortuna iuvat*. We have chosen a rather paradoxical example, since in such competition the best calculator is theoretically sure of winning or of stalemating. But in all human occupations, and therefore *a fortiori* in recreational activities, the indetermination of the future plays a role which can be lessened but not reduced to nothing. From this point of view, what game is not a game of "chance?" Without what sport commentators call "the glorious uncertainty of sport" which is simply the global name for a vertiginous number of unforeseeable factors, determined beyond doubt, but indeterminable in their totality, and so foreign one to another that they cannot be "integrated," a match of rugby or tennis would have no spectacular interest. It would be the equivalent of an experimental verification.

The fact that a rugby match is not called a game of chance whereas roulette and trente et quarante are, does not depend on the lack of any chance on one side and its omnipresence on the other.

So much the more since the omnipresence of chance in these latter games is ceaselessly contested by the more or less scientific optimism of methodical players. Inversely the formula for sports: "may the best one win" is a pure and simple wish and presents the result as precarious. Besides, anything that hangs upon favourable circumstances yet to come, and which therefore requires prayers, includes a degree of indetermination. It is said that some recruiting campaigns are carried out in a "hit or miss" way, that the candidates either have or do not have luck. It is even said that marriage is a lottery. It is even possible to hear people making such confessions as "I tried my chance in business but I had no luck. That is why I am trying now to 'set myself up again' at the

*lotto*?) or at least in which it plays a very small role. This uncertainty seems regrettable to us from the moment that a non exterior criterium is proposed to define games of chance which provides a sound basis for making an inventory of the sphere of recreational alea. On the other hand fiscal law is not in error. Its definitions tend towards laxness and generosity but the consequences deduced are much less lax and generous and it considers games of chance all those games in which some money is used.

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casino.” This seems to indicate that roulette is not much more capricious than the stock exchange or real estate speculation.

What is then the specificity of games of chance? If children before beginning a game requiring definite roles, choose at random the personages and their function using a syllabic count, would we say that before playing hide and seek they played a game of chance? Certainly not. The formula for designating roles is chosen because of its impartiality, so that nobody has any responsibility in giving out the bad roles. The same thing happens when two children possessing a single indivisible titbit play heads or tails to know who will eat it. Election by drawing lots, a late descendant of the method of designating magistrates in the city of Athens, is not a game of chance, nor is having the candidate at an oral examination choose one little piece of paper which will contain his exam question from a great number of similar papers. It is rather strange that the zenith of justice be reached, in these cases, in a negative way, eliminating the partialities and resulting in an absurd impartiality.

Since it is not possible to attribute the same roles or the same subjects to all the players or candidates, we are satisfied to leave everybody the “same chances” of having the good or bad roles, of “extracting” the easy questions or the difficult questions. In point of fact, these proceedings shift the charge of injustice to fate. And the injustice of fate is better than that of man. As soon as unequal distribution escapes human control and is no longer influenced by individual partialities, the justice of man seems to wash its hands of the inevitable differences it has sown.<sup>2</sup>

On the other hand drawing lots may become a game of chance if it is accompanied by a fundamental circumstance: the stake. It can be said that in the above mentioned cases there is a stake, passing the exam or playing a good role, just as there was a stake in the drawing of heliasts, i.e. being invested with the enviable office of magistrate, and as there was a stake in the drawing of

<sup>2</sup> In the myth of Er (*Republic*, X, 617, d, e) it is by drawing lots that the souls called back to earth are arranged in a certain order. One after the other, according to fate’s decision, they will have to choose a model of life. A hierophant declares in the name of Lachesis: “The responsibility belongs to him who chooses. God is not responsible.” God is not even responsible for the order of priority.

recruits in the last century, the desire to remain a civilian. So be it, but this stake is not put up by the "one who draws." The one who draws certainly risks losing or winning, but he does not have the freedom to determine the stake. The stake is what is freely played and risked. Because of this the drawer does not say that chance is the master of these balls or papers: it is destiny. A faint subjective difference perhaps, through which however is posited the irresponsibility of the drawer who without hesitating yields to a blind operation presented as absolutely or hypothetically compulsory and will feel afterwards little remorse for having lost. If fate is against him, at least he did not provoke it. Whereas, if the stake has been freely fixed, by "private agreement" between two partners, it would seem that they have willingly solicited the intervention of a third superhuman judge.

*La Loterie de Babylone*, a novel by Borges explains clearly this human aspect of the stake. This lottery at the beginning was as all the others, and the Babylonians were free to accept or to refuse participating in it. Only those who wanted bought a ticket. Naturally, the prizes were paid in cash, corresponding no doubt to the partial redistribution of the total stakes to the few winning numbers. It was nothing but a game. Many clever transformations soon changed this lottery into fate. It became obligatory, and the organizers found out that it was interesting to conceal the names of the winners and the nature of the prizes. At a certain moment the lottery began designating, always secretly, some losers. So that accidents, sicknesses and deaths were attributed to the blind decision of the lottery, as well as all the happy or simply normal events. How in fact is it possible to think of fate, if not as an obligatory lottery? Fate is not only an indeterminable need, it is also the need of that need. But a game is a game only because of the contingency of this need. It is the freedom of the stake that guarantees this contingency.

The two children who entrusted to heads or tails the decision of whom should have the object they could not divide into shares, were not playing. They would have been playing if they had added to the bet they laid, one on heads, the other on tails, a stake which might have been the object itself. In fact the stake does not necessarily consist in a sum of money. But because of its variable character it is convenient to define it. In general any

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object having a value may become a "stake." Evidently it is necessary that one of the players be interested in winning what the other player fears to lose and viceversa. From this point of view it seems that the game of chance implies a whole analysable structure of human significations, which can be reduced to three principal ones.

In the first place the reciprocity of loss and gain implies a society of players which in certain cases can be reduced to a couple of bettors. But it is never possible to play a game of chance "all alone." In the second place the contrast of interests supposes a reversibility of gain and loss, and hence a particular value for the thing at stake: it must be an exchange value, an object which has approximately the same attraction for the two rival consciences. From this second condition springs a third meaning, perhaps the deepest one: a paradoxical rapport between gambling (which endangers economic values) and work (which produces the same economic values). This triple essence can be found in every game, and viceversa, it seems that it is not possible to define a game as game of chance if it does not have these three fundamental characteristics.

It may happen that a man finds pleasure in handling the instruments of chance, cards, dice, etc. In a certain sense he plays. But he plays as one plays with a plaything. The object he handles is no longer an aleatory machine, but an attractive thing whose functioning or whims engender entertainment. That is why a child might be seen playing all alone with a roulette on a small scale. To the specific pleasure he has in handling the cylinder is added the joy of imitating an adult activity, that of the real player. He "pretends" to be playing roulette, as he sometimes pretends to be station-master while he plays with his electric train. It is also possible that for an adult, somewhat of a dreamer, the operation of throwing the dice or of arranging cards in a certain way is linked to some form of survival, to some archaic belief never completely dissolved in any civilized conscience. It is in this way that one puts cards together at hazard to learn the result of an undertaking. In this manner one invents rather arbitrarily some divinatory processes. Fortune-tellers tell you to think hard about what worries you. And in the same way, when alone, without believing too much in it, one forms as clearly as

possible the image of a project and one interrogates, according to a certain code, the divinity enclosed in the aleatory cube or the enigmatic figures of the cards. Rousseau tells us, in his *Réveries du promeneur solitaire*, that he happened to link the result of such an operation as hitting with many stones the trunk of a tree, with the real success of a project. We are here at the source of the fabling, of the myth and of the dreamy connivance of reason and irrationality. Bergson has shown the complicity of dreaming and superstition, a complicity that modern psychology has exclusively perceived between dreams and myths. But to dream is not to play. These two forms of behavior have nothing in common but the exclusion of seriousness from existence. One can dream alone; but it is necessary to be two in order to play.

There is evidently a kind of competition in such diversions as “beggar-my-neighbour,” heads or tails and roulette. But what we have just said will lead us to discard the oversimplified idea of competition between the player and chance. The competition is among the players, chance plays the role of the judge who will elect the winner and the loser. Whatever example one may take, there will always be a bettor who wants to get hold of the stake of the other bettor. To play against chance would mean that chance is risking something, a proposition which is totally absurd. Chance is there as a third party, appointed by a clear convention as the only one capable of designating the winner. Chance never loses.

The most direct consequence of this social aspect of games is the economic nature of the stake. It logically results from the reciprocity of desires and fears. It must be a common language and at the same time an opposed interest. Therefore it must be an exchange value. That is why the best and most common stake is money itself. But it may consist in any object one wants on condition that it might be changed for money or be translated in monetary terms. Still, on either side of this economic value which constitutes the typical stake, there are atypical stakes, one completely at the bottom of the scale, close to zero, the other at the top of the scale coinciding with the highest value. We must say it immediately: these exceptional stakes must again fall into place or be absolutely excluded from the discussion.

In the first case, we can imagine that in some games of chance,

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roulette for instance, outside of a casino of course, the stake may be completely symbolic, some beans for example. But for the game to be interesting, it is necessary that these vegetables be given by the players, at least temporarily, a value other than their alimentary one. Just as plaques in a real casino represent sums of money for which they can be immediately exchanged, it is necessary that these vegetables represent real riches. Therefore it is necessary for all the players to adopt a convention according to which these beans used as stakes are actual money. Since even this convention is not serious, it is a game in itself. So that roulette becomes a game within a game. The mediate character of this entertainment and the necessarily ideal nature of its product evidently weaken the emotions and pleasures it engenders. Those who give themselves up to it are conscious of not really playing but of amusing themselves by playing. Necessarily the game must stop when the amusement ends. The childishness of this behavior would be even greater, if in the game, the game "for real," there were not an agreement reached through another convention, because our systems of exchange are based on conventional definitions of money, with conventional multiples and sub-multiples. But since these conventions are not limited during the duration of the game, they exist both before and after, conferring upon it its own statute, which is to say to be a parasite of work. There is a stake only when there is a risk. And in order to have an effective risk it is necessary that the value at stake be still a value once the game is over.

At the other extreme, we must consider the supreme stake: life. On its basis economic values are determined, and hence being a condition of economic value, life itself is not an economic value. The problem is to know if one plays when risking one's life. A problem whose "terms" would be absurd enough in order to solve it immediately, were it not for a certain number of disquieting facts. The terms of the problem are absurd because the sacrifice of life implies, as any sacrifice, a value which is sacrificed and a value to which one sacrifices it. By definition this value is subjectively superior to life. Therefore also by definition, it is a serious, non-recreational value. But the disquieting or rather aberrant facts must be examined. At first the name of Russian roulette was given to a type of aleatory suicide whose

original model was performed with a cylinder pistol containing only one cartridge but whose innumerable derivated forms may require different materials, as for instance a motorcycle. In some Latin American towns, with a geometrical city-plan, with transversal rectilinear streets and longitudinal avenues with the right of priority, it was in fashion some years ago for some young people on motorcycles to cross the city going from one end of the street to the other, at a relatively quiet hour of the day, but on condition of not stopping at any intersection in spite of the priority of the traffic on the avenues. This dangerous game sometimes resulted in deadly accidents. Since the popular name of this kind of risk is borrowed from the language of the casinos, one could be lead to think that life is a stake like any other. Indeed the bettor in this case is alone face to face with what he believes to be his destiny. Nobody else will win what he is risking, and he himself has no hope of winning anything analogous or comparable to what he endangers. Human life in general, excepting the case of slavery, has no commercial value and it is absurd to bet one's life against a commercial value *with* another bettor. In fact, what could he do with your life? It is even more absurd to bet one's life against another's. Therefore we deem it necessary to bring back the case of Russian roulette to either one of the following forms of behavior.

Either a blasé behavior. With no despair but also with no attachment to life, accompanied by a romantic form of weariness, one turns over to a non-human judge the bother of deciding if one must continue living or not. This judge, according to his verdict, will or will not make the cylinder coincide with the striker. In short, as there were trials by combat until the 14th century, Russian roulette would be a kind of judicial suicide, a provocation of the "judgment of God." Only God can judge if our life is worth being kept or not: let Him make His verdict known.

Or a behavior of bravado. As we said, there is stake, biological life. But there is an *enjeu*: the esteem of oneself and the esteem of others. The difference not only in the value but in the nature of the chance of winning and the chance of losing creates an abyss between Russian roulette and common roulette. For in Russian roulette you do not try to obtain what your antagonist



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wants to take away from you: you are trying to have the adversary not risk what you are risking, and therefore not play the game you are playing. In a game there is a bet on the stake. In aleatory suicide the bet is on whether or not you play the game. In a game you say: I bet I am going to win. In Russian roulette you say: I bet you will not play. To win this kind of bet on a bet is to recognize one's own superiority in the other's fear. The game, if in this instance we can call it a game, is entangled in a dialectic which surpasses it immensely. By means of a mechanical intermediary, quick and perilous, that equalizes chances and therefore makes *tabula rasa* of the differences in physical strength, this game is the equivalent of the confrontation between "master and slave," brought back to its perfect but irrational ethical model: the pointless death-struggle of two gallant spirits.

There is also the case of metaphysical bets: "the beautiful danger" of Socrates, the Pascalian bet and the Kantian postulates. In these cases too what is at stake and what one hopes to win is beyond all common measure. If Pascal is responsible for utilizing a gambling term to designate the irrational movement of faith, enough commentators have already reproached him for this, accusing him of having perverted theological language, or of having mixed interest with a meditation which should have been merely speculative, so that we can be spared repeating once again their criticisms.<sup>3</sup> Pascal's bet aside from being considered a game of chance is above all a play upon words. For if the stake is made up of the joys of this life, there is no partner. Betting with no one has no meaning. Nevertheless something justifies the word. Betting expresses the irrationality of faith. Later, in order to describe the same irrational operation, Kant will employ a less imaginative language hence less deceptive, less likely to mislead his commentators and which does not expose itself to the superficial criticisms of the Pascalian bet:<sup>4</sup> he will speak of "postulate." Basically any righteous opinion, not backed up by knowledge, is not to be trusted because it implies a risk, the risk

<sup>3</sup> It is nonetheless necessary to place on another plane the mathematical criticisms of the Pascalian bet, for instance that of Borel: betting conceals a parallogism because Pascal pretends to build up its necessity on the importance of the possible gain.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Goldmann, *Le Dieu caché*.

of error. But, pending further information, we consider the risk of error very different from the recreational risk, and the metaphysical faith very different from a game.

Let us say therefore that in the real game, the stake is necessarily a relative value and an exchange value, recognized simultaneously by all the members of a society of players. There is another problem, that of the ambiguous rapports brought about by the intermediary of this exchange value between game and work. From the very first we must do away with the ambiguity caused by a certain lack of unity in the sphere of recreation. When a child or a young animal are moving freely clearly displaying their gaiety, one says that they play or that they amuse themselves. This last term, even if popular and not yet ennobled by anthropological sciences, is very precise. It is not possible to amuse oneself sadly. To amuse oneself, means to find pleasure in an occupation which one has chosen by himself. On the other hand, if playing implies the same freedom of choice, it too detaches itself from forms of constraint. It is nonetheless true that a game may be more or less amusing and in extreme cases very sad. Does not Jules Renard tell us that Poil de Carotte "played at nothing under the table?" This gloomy picture brings to mind Baudelaire's game of cards, "fatal heritage of a dropsical old woman" in which "the beautiful Jack of Hearts and the Queen of Spades... dismally chat of their dead love," and many memories of distractions that were hardly amusing. Any game is threatened by tedium, doubtless because it is destined to ward off tedium, and the tedium of life endures. It would be therefore unwise to say that the player amuses himself. This would be in contrast with his feeling of performing a consistent, mature act and also with the much repeated observation that many players are sad. Go tell the old ladies who, already before ten o' clock, await the opening of the Casino in Montecarlo, that they are there to amuse themselves. They are subjugated to their task and exhausted they will leave the Casino only early the next morning.

But if we can define recreational activity by defining recreational joy, to which essence does it correspond? To diversion no doubt, but only on condition that here too one discovers the term in relation to which the diversion amuses. It is impossible to give precise definitions of recreational activity and serious activity.

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According to the contents attributed to what is serious in life, nearly all human occupations will seem by turns recreational or quasi-recreational. Montaigne said that "most of our vacations are farcical." We know what activities Pascal devoted his time to: after this philosophical pigeonvole\* what is left that is really "serious?" It should be decided therefore once and for all what is meant by "serious" in relation to which the game is defined as recreation. There is only one unquestionable point of reference. A game is not work and work is not a game. Now, work is precisely the economic origin of the values that are at stake in the game. It is work which guarantees the reality of gain and loss and gives effect to the risk run. But it is in relation to work that games of chance are determined as non-work.

This contradiction is very interesting and starting with it one can better perceive what constitutes the unity of different types of games of chance. Within the sphere of games in general, games of chance assume an original physiognomy as soon as one understands their specific relationship with the economic world. First of all, by means of this relationship, the seriousness of economic life is conveyed to the lucrative recreational activities. Since the sanctions of success or loss are not imaginary but real sanctions, within the recreational sphere strict regulation systems are formed, with a penal code copied more or less from common law. Moreover, the ambitions, the hopes, as well as the joys, the anxieties and the dramas of which the casinos are the theater, are not acted but perfectly genuine. We have just said that these games are not amusements. We must add that they are not even games which are entirely games. We are far from the dreamy or imaginary world in which lovers of entertainment delight. If we are agreed to call delirium an imaginary world which is lived in as though it were real, it is necessary to say that the strange rapports between money games and money make of these games a form of delirium. Everything has the consistence of the concrete world and if the player has turned his back upon the effective tasks of human everyday life, he did so to enclose himself in another form of reality.

\* *Pigeonvole*: children's game with forfeits. [Note of the Translator]

All or nearly all the games borrow their object from daily reality and they live on this loan. But they transform what they have taken from the world into a “plaything.” The piece of wood becomes a sword, the garden becomes the Far-West. Imagination on the basis of ordinary things conjures up marvels. But what games of chance have borrowed from social reality is a particular thing which does not transfigure itself, no doubt because it has already been transfigured, it is already a “fetich.” This plaything contaminates with its presence the whole ensemble of gestures, words and feelings which however ascribes itself as a game. Financial dealings in an economic society will remain linked, so to speak, to the money risked on the poker table. What is transfigured is not the object taken from the world, because this endures as it is, with its value and its significant structure, but the way of obtaining it, the ensemble of rules, obligations and operations determining the way of dividing it. Therefore, what there is of free in this game is only the fact that one is freed from the ordinary needs which regulate winnings and losses. But they are replaced by new rules which accelerate the rythm of riches and ruin. In point of fact, the world of gamblers tends to establish itself with a framework as strict as that of the real world, like a fraudulent micro-universe which has a hold over a reality which gives it its substance, and to which the player is subjectively and objectively linked.

Can we now trace a border between what we called, for want of a better term, games of chance or money games, or casino games and all the others? This border should also fix the boundaries between the object of our studies and all the other activities which socially and economically are considered as non-recreational. Because if the world of games is a fraud, we have to recognize that the society that does not play is an accomplice to this fraud. We must recognize that this society favors it directly with interested advertizing as well as indirectly by supplying it with economic models—the different forms of speculation—and by bestowing upon it, as a plaything, the monetary institutions which the society has surrounded with all kind of myths. This second limit is rather delicate to establish according to the opinion of those who consider stock exchange operations very analogous

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to betting.<sup>5</sup> The difference consists in the fact that the roulette is an instrument of chance which is pure, free of all cunning, of all science of prevision inferred from the conjunctural comet, while at the stock exchange one can influence the croupier. So be it, but what about speculating on a horse that one has "followed," whose performances, breeder, trainer and jockey are known? In the same way one takes a calculated risk on stocks whose co-ordinates have been studied, whose chances of fructification have been estimated within the infra-structures and super structures which are as stable as the mood, the physiological functionings of horses and riders or their reactions to meteorological caprices. Let us say it at once: one passes insensibly from one form of betting to another. Therefore, if one were to define gambling subjectively, the line of demarcation would enclose a wide segment of the economic life. But objectively gambling is an an-economic operation pursuing economic ends. Financial transactions have an immediate reverberation on the world of work. It may be that fortunes or bankrupts which temporarily enrich or devastate the pseudo-society of gamblers or bookmakers have an incidence on economy but this happens as a result of a great number of mediations and taking into account the margin of freedom of the gambler and the non-gambler.

Our field is therefore circumscribed to the activities characterized as follows:

- 1) It is necessary from the very first that the issue or result of the chronological succession of events, which constitutes the game be indeterminable. We could not consider as valid, from the recreational point of view, the bets of astronomers concerning an eclipse.

- 2) In order to have a game there must be present many partners with different opinions. We cannot consider valid a bet against oneself, or a bet against natural laws. A game cannot start without at least two adversaries.

- 3) The gambler must give a value commensurate with the extent of his belief in regard to the upshot of the experience and express it in a common language, fixing it with an exchange value before initiating the series of events which constitute the game

<sup>5</sup> Cf. also the "emprunts à lots," since the 18th century.

or at a moment, determined by convention, during this series of events when there still can be no indication of the game's final phase.

4) Until the end of the game, fixed by common consent, the gamblers must maintain a kind of sworn loyalty to the oath they took to pay the opponent, whose forecasts were correct, the values they attributed to their erroneous belief.

5) Since the game is a temporary contract, there must be, tacitly or not, a beginning and an end. One gambles only during the duration of the contract, whose initial and terminal moments are clearly delimited.

If the problem is approached from this angle, it will be easy to recognize the lucrative recreational activities amongst the others, and on the other hand, to grasp the objective difference between the recreational risk and the other social risks.

All bets be they entrusted to a judge or to the good faith of the bettors, whether requiring proof or being entrusted to the memory of each bettor, fall under the same rubric as the promise to give up a stake at the end of an aleatory distribution of cards or after an equally aleatory throwing of dice. Any human activity can give birth to a game, if its result is at all unforeseeable. Thus we can see that, with respect to a political rivalry, an election, a war or a peace, a sport encounter or with respect to a game which in itself is not a game of chance, two adversaries assess at a certain sum the degree of confidence they have in the success of the party, the candidate, the team or champion they have chosen. On the other hand it is clear that the case of speculation considered above does not enter directly into the sphere we are dealing with, unless the fifth condition of being bound by a contract precisely limited in time is fulfilled.

Basically, if the concept of betting is that which coincides most precisely with the conditions we have enumerated, we must consider games of chance as whimsical diversifications of an original essence, that of the bet. And we could propose to replace the inaccurate, deceitful and incomplete denominations which have been used so many times, with a more precise concept. "Casino game" has the defect of leaving in the shadow the games played in gaming-houses, clandestine bets but also private bets and also the innumerable slot-machines whose ostentation in public places

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is the “doing up” of a hidden bettor. “Game of chance” is not suitable either because, as we have seen, it is ambiguous and too broad, since, if we have to identify the indeterminable and the fortuitous, any competition, with or without a stake, is subsumed within its concept. “Money game” is too narrow since it would exclude stakes in kind such as clothing, villas, properties, pleasure-boats etc...., but too wide since it would include professional sports. We do not dare propose the Greek word *rhētra* which sounds badly in French and is difficult to write, nor the English word “betting” whose use is too limited. We therefore propose “recreational contracts” which is less extended than the “aleatory contracts” of the Civil Code.

## II

To find the human significance of betting it is necessary to go back to oracular techniques and to the ordeal. It is interesting to remark that the material used in games or the preferential occasions of betting are always related to the ancient processes which were supposed to reveal the future. One day, three girls playing together questioned destiny in order to know which one of them would descend to Hades first. Three times they threw the die with their hands and always the same girl was singled out. The ill-fated girl laughed but unexpectedly she fell from a roof and descended to Hades according to the destiny which was her lot. (Becq de Fouquières)<sup>6</sup> In ancient Greece cleromancy or divination by lots became the privilege of a few specialists. But in ancient India there were dice which revealed the future and in the Far East, notably in Korea, arrows or diviner’s wands were used.<sup>7</sup> According to Scarne they might be the origin of playing-cards. Even today, the same cards that are used in a poker game, allow the fortune-teller to read the future. In the same manner the tarots of diviners may become playing-cards. Divination by numbers, known to the Greeks, is also related to lotteries. In

<sup>6</sup> Quoted by Alleau, *Dictionnaire des jeux* (Tchou, 1964), p. 156.

<sup>7</sup> Ancient Korean cards represent different varieties of feathers. This form suggests that the Korean cards evolved from divinatory arrows or diviner’s wands. Cf. notably Scarne, *Complete Guide to Gambling* (New York, 1961), pp. 526-527.

every country of the world there are diviners who advise people as to what numbers to choose for lotteries or bingo, a significant collusion of the oracles and the gods of chance. The Greek word *rhetra* means at one and the same time oracle and betting. Count Hammond claimed that roulette is not a Western invention and that it has “existed in the Far East for a long time, where it was used for occult calculations in order to determine the rhythm which governed the appearance and disappearance of numbers.”<sup>8</sup> Very likely Count Hammond, an illuminated gambler, was wrong, nevertheless his comparison of divination and games of chance is very interesting. History and ethnography teach us that ichthyomancy exists consisting in the observation and interpretation of fights between fishes. Even nowadays in South East Asia there are people who place bets on fighting fishes. We could give many examples. It is not a very large step from this to the concept of betting as a kind of prediction. However, the difference is very clear. For the oracle the mechanical or animal material is a means of divination. It is the result of a certain experiment which will supply the secret of the future provided that one has an esoteric knowledge and a code. On the contrary, in the case of the betting, the problem consists in discovering what will be the result of the experiment while it is being carried out. The point of issue of the process observed by the diviner and the gambler functions in two very different ways: it is sometimes an instrument of the oracle, sometimes a sanction of the oracle. Nevertheless it is possible to imagine in the gambler a mental process which quite links him to the diviner. If the machine, the success of his champion, verifies his words, it is evidently because he had a gift of clairvoyance, a gift which was lacking in the unlucky adversary who placed the bad bet. On one hand “chance” or the “lucky streak” consist of this clairvoyance. On the other hand the oracle once upon a time was consulted in cases of embroiled and risky affairs almost necessarily requiring contestations and at the close of which there had to be a winning party and a losing party.

In ornithomantic divination as related to us in the *Iliad*, consisting in the subtle hermeneutics of a fight between nine birds and a serpent, there is at stake the destiny of two collectivities.

<sup>8</sup> Herarld and Radin quote the anecdote: *Un siècle de roulette*.



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Let us imagine them gathered together, strong in their own right, proclaiming before its end the result of the intersignificant battle. Then one perceives the perfect conciliation of the oracular technique and the recreational contract. In short, the bettor is always saying that the gods are on his side and he awaits more or less calmly the decision of the oracle.

The ordeal provides us with the origin of the recreational pledge, the stake. Mucius Scaevola certainly did not gamble, but by giving his painful pledge he ascribed to himself certain rights, at the same time ascribing them to his country.<sup>9</sup> He affirms his good faith, he gives weight to his judgment. As it is said, he “gives a gage.” The stake is a double guarantee, closely related to the ordeal. It is a pledge (in the legal sense of the word) measuring the degree of seriousness that the bettor attributes to his prediction, and more prosaically, for the adversary it is a guarantee of payment if he wins. The ordeal provokes supernatural intervention, based on a very simple form of reasoning. “I put my hand on the fire and it is not possible, if there is justice and since I am on the right side, that a miracle not occur.” It is a little bit like what the gambler says to himself when he is playing baccarat and is at the bottom of his pool and plays everything. It does not seem possible to him that at that moment a prodigious change will not take place. So sincere is his desire to win that it constitutes “good faith.” And this good faith is pledged because of the extreme relative value he attributes to the last money entrusted to the “grace of God.” The gambler as a bettor is the man of *providence* while as a diviner he is the man of *foresight*. The game is therefore made up originally by an ambiguous synthesis of prevision and prayer, and betting appears to be similar to both the prophetic *manteia* of an event which is normally indeterminable and the ordeal by which the bettor gives a pledge of his good faith while entreating divine intervention, and even making this intervention morally necessary by means of a kind of blackmail.

This however does not constitute the full essence of the bet. The bettor in fact does not know that he yields himself to a mantic

<sup>9</sup> At least if one considers the legend of Mucius Scaevola as the refracted memory of an ancient ordeal. Cf. Dumézil, *L'héritage indo-européen à Rome* (Paris, 1949) and *Naissance de Rome* (Gallimard, 1944).

operation and he does not believe that with his stake he exerts coercion analogous to that of the judicial combat. This happens, it seems to us, because these two originary essences are masked or rather mediatized by another, the challenge. In point of fact; all the interest of the bet lies in the particular relationship with other people. The divinatory relationship and the relationship of the ordeal are between the diviner or the provoker and a supernatural spirit and resemble a kind of dialogue or competition whith it. The dialogue and the competition involved in the bet are relationships existing between the bettors. This evidently implies that the purpose of the bet is the defeat of the adversary and that the decision of the gods is only a mediate objective. We shall try to explain, on the one hand, how the concepts which formed the theoretic conditions of vaticinations and pledges related to ordeals were rendered futile and, on the other hand, attempt to define the recreational challenge.

A religious practice or a magic rite are never games in themselves. The extreme importance attributed in ancient or primitive civilizations to the functions of priests in the former and wizards in the latter are well-known. It justified many privileges and gave a social prestige with which no secular occupation could compete. And it is precisely this circumstance which we must investigate in order to see how the sacred tasks were rendered futile. We can, after M. Caillois, make a rather singular observation about the theories of games from Spencer and Wundt to Karl Gross, Chateau and Piaget.<sup>10</sup> On the whole, theoreticians of games are in agreement when they admit that recreational and serious activities are related genetically. But they do not agree when they have to establish an order of priority in this relationship. According to Spencer and Wundt games are above all a "dramatization" of adult activity, or "a child of work." According to the others, games prepare for adult life, either by giving exercise to the sensory and motory organs, or by providing an apprenticeship to the rules of conduct and the assimilation of the fundamental notions of collective life. These concepts diverge less than one would think, as soon as one perceives that an education necessarily implies the imitation of a model which one wishes to resemble.

<sup>10</sup> R. Caillois, *Les jeux et les hommes* (Gallimard, 1958), pp. 255-299.

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Hence it would be well-founded to say that the first theories complete the second simply by developing their concept. The apparent opposition derives from the fact that this recreational activity is considered from the psychological angle as well as from the pedagogical angle: these two points of view tend normally to reverse reciprocally the order of their terms.<sup>11</sup>

But at the same time that a general theory of game behavior takes form in the midst of the psycho-pedagogical polemics, authors display an astonishing ostracism: they do not take games of chance into consideration at all. The games of chance are the reserved field of a few mathematicians. The games of chance are wall-flowers. Why should they be excluded from the recreational sphere? The reasons for the psychologists' severity are many. The main interest of the game of heads and tails appears only to the mathematician. It is rather natural to consider that the pedagogical interest in bets and lotteries, not to speak of casino games, is rather negative than null. A regrettable interference of morals and scientific observation has made people modestly close their eyes as to the childish origins of what is regarded as detestable among adults. After all, the superficial observers in good faith could be unaware of the fact that innocent children amuse themselves playing aleatory games because they carefully disguise chance. The game of marbles, which has its own currency, or better still has fiduciary multiples and sub-multiples (a clay marble is worth half a glass marble which is worth four times less than a steel marble) leaves a great room for bets and stakes.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> An additional distinction should be taken into account. The pedagogue who wishes to consider games as preparation for adult life risks proposing to his pupil only the so-called "destructive" amusements which are so sad. Games represent above all a free activity. As soon as an external authority determines its contents or even makes it compulsory, the game becomes a task: it will disgust the best wills and in any case the worst. This will lead us to discern in the game an aim for itself and an aim in itself. The objective function of the game may perhaps be apprenticeship (biological, professional, economical, military... etc.) But the subjective purpose of the game must be disencumbered of these adult ambitions otherwise the game will stop being a game. Subjectively the game is in itself its own purpose.

<sup>12</sup> It is useless to invoke other aleatory competitions in which the object at stake is precisely the object used to play. Besides, these games have no name because very often they are given rules as soon as they are invented and disappear with the occasion which brought them to life.

The banishing of *alea* by psychologists and pedagogues is arbitrary. It would be wise to re-integrate it into the general sphere of games. The recreational imitation of sacred manoeuvres is not exceptional. The Hopi Indians at the end of their ceremonies used to give their children the figurines of their cult, which becoming profane, were used as dolls. The recreational comedy which evolved from serious occupations, related to a vaguely determined hereafter, from solicitations of oracles and miracles is the same as rendering ineffective the beliefs related to divination and ordeal. These beliefs are not dead. They are a dormant aspect of our betting behavior and they lend their pathetic note to recreational contracts. To determine what proportion of magic beliefs is left in betting is no mean task. But one might think that determining these proportions is really useless. Betting is the actual experience of the antithetical relationship of faith and uncertainty, of confidence and diffidence. Betting means living on two levels of existence which however should be mutually exclusive. The conquests of reason have not deeply modified our sensibility. Even if we know, we do not stop believing.

The scientific theories of betting are, for this reason, at the same time, mathematically instructive and psychologically quite derisory. The probability, as determined by calculation, falls before the will to win at all costs, a will which lives in the heart of every bettor. The mathematical expectation and expectation *tout court* cannot be measured by the same standards. After all, to bet is not to stake on a certainty. When the chances are too unequal all the bets are on one side and nobody wins anything. Therefore there is real betting only when the chances are the same, when uncertainty is at its zenith. To bet comes from the Latin word *pariare*. The true bettor is bound to turn up his nose at the combinative science because he confusedly feels that it would be of no help to him in the situation in which he finds himself. To the contrary, he who knows enough of the theory of probabilities will never bet. The best advice one can take from the mathematics of betting is never to enter a casino. Finally, after many roundabouts, the mathematician catches up with good sense which had already given this advice. But is it possible to bet with good sense?

The bettor does not estimate his chances, he lays a claim on

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them. A lot of magic devices are normally in use in playing houses. Some people think that a certain chair brings good luck, others think that it is necessary to be next to a blond woman. Inversely there are situations, objects and dresses to avoid at all costs. The superstition of numbers according to a thousand picturesque circumstances, commits ravages amongst the frequenters of the lottery and the racetrack. The gambler always squeezes convulsively something in his hand, some amulet, during the course of the fatidic operation at the end of which he will be rich or poor. Of course the importance of what is at stake may excuse such primitivizations. But it does not explain them. It would be also useless to attribute them to the congenital superstition of the gambler. As if the gambler had a specific essence and every man were not a potential gambler. In truth, we are all in the same condition: the most methodic mind falters as soon as he enters the doors of the casino. To believe or not to believe, as we know from Bergson, are not so mutually incompatible as we thought before. But what one knows in a rational way is not without its effect upon what one continues to believe despite science. Science relegates ancient superstitions to a sort of mental granary and they come back to life only in the pathetic occasions of existence. In this way a certain self-contempt is born, a certain human respect, incapable of taking away all value from the old naïvetés. Simultaneously one thinks of the futility of belief and the futile credulity subsists.

But betting is also and above all a challenge. The recreational contracts are a part of what are commonly called "parlor games." The expression is at the same time ingenuous and significant. Ingenuous because it brings back the memory of a lost idleness which cannot be revived and also evokes a surpassed moment of our existence, that of childhood, which is rightly considered pre-social. But it is significant because "parlor games" are social games. They imply rules, the image of a code applied to the smallest detail, in virtue of devices of language and ingenious transpositions. They require the co-ordination of multiple participations. Group psychology, psychodramas have their ancestors in the collective recreational rites. The micro-society they established was rich with teachings. In short, betting includes the primordial social essence: competition.

In fact, the recreational contract is maybe the most essential of all games. To take up again Caillois<sup>13</sup> interesting classification we may separate *alea*, *ilinx*, *mimicry* and *agon*. Since the author of this classification illustrates the flexible utilization of these fundamental categories we are able to describe betting through all of these concepts successively. Risk gives birth to strong emotions, mixtures of anguish and rapture<sup>14</sup> which ally betting to the vertigo. But in itself it has, or at least it brings to a climax of purity, the original essence of the *alea*, which of all the recreational essences is the most specifically human. Our proposition that the hypothetical origins of betting lie in the overly-serious oracular operations, or in those of the ordeal makes of it an example of simulation, a very important concept which elevates the game in its specificity above the engaged and serious activities in relation to which it keeps its distance by parodying them: therefore betting is also mimicry. Finally, since betting presupposes at least one disputer, that is to say, two parties in mutual antagonism, it is competition or agon.

We may also think that betting is the most exemplary game of competition. It is in fact a game in which rivalry shows itself in its purest state. It consists in a fight whose loyalty is perfect, since two "equals" face each other. Any other competition is adulterated by the inevitable inequalities which influence the outcome from the very start. In intellectual competition, in wrestling or in races, the best must win, that is to say, the strongest, fastest and most artful one. There is no loyal struggle where natural disloyalty has falsified the test. We do not think often enough that weak, slow and silly people also have a right to a chance. Extreme loyalty in a competition is reached when the chances are "the same," and when in advance there can be neither a winner nor a loser. The decision does not depend on force or on cunning but on a third factor, totally indifferent to both of them, therefore rigorously impartial. What could one teach betting from the point of view of equity? Paradoxically, when there is

<sup>13</sup> *Op. cit.*

<sup>14</sup> "I love with rapture the children of the great Vibhâkâda (the God of games), the dice in motion, falling and rolling on the ground! My rapture is similar to that produced by soma (sacred beverage)..." (*Règi-Veda*, quoted by Alleau, *op. cit.*)

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no possible justification for winning or losing, then a kind of justice appears. And when the struggle does not depend upon the virtue of the fighter, the success is clear and beyond discussion. What is magnificent about betting is that it offers the weak and silly revenge over the strong and intelligent people who normally win all the other battles too easily. This revenge is offered to them precisely because chance offers revenge to no one, holds the balance exactly horizontal and is perfectly iniquitous in the face of proportional justice which calculates benefits according to merits. It is supposed that all men are equal before death, and this is a whim, because some die peacefully and others burn alive. In point of fact men are equal only in front of chance. They are indistinguishable only in the darkness of the aleatory future, where all ignorance is grey.

That is why in betting, the challenge is clear of all corruption. Since the victory is decided upon only by "destiny," it is not over-determined by muscular power, skill and competency which are contingent virtues. It is an *essential* struggle. We may even say that betting is possibly the most perfect incarnation of the pure concept of rivalry. In the German ordeals or in the Middle Ages at the same time when God was obliged to interfere by a sort of blackmail, the decision was not solely his because—many iniquities revealed it—virtue, the human virtues of the men struggling, interfered with his own justice. If the more brave, the more able in the handling of weapons or with more developed muscles wins, we have the right to ask ourselves if the human powers were not prevailing over God and the heaviest weapons had not covered with their noise the voice of justice. It took the people some centuries to be convinced and trial by combat became a tournament—a pure sport—or duel—a private affair. On the other hand, betting does not run any risk of being equally perverted because something preserves it from any alteration: its own irrationality, the unforeseeability of the cause to which it devotes itself and to which it gives its pledge, in short the rigorous independence of the judge. Betting transcends the empirical conditions and achieves the ideality: it is the non-refracted image of the archetypal competition.