

From “Homo Spielens” by Fröbel to “Homo Ludens” by Huizinga: The Foundations of Human Development and Culture through Play

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Friedrich Wilhelm August Fröbel, the founder of the kindergarten system, is a pivotal figure in understanding the role of play in human development and culture. His innovative approach to education, emphasizing the importance of play and its intrinsic connection to language and creativity, laid the groundwork for modern educational theories and practices. Fröbel's vision of what we term the *homo spieldens* encapsulates the idea that play is not merely a leisure activity, but a vital element in the holistic development of a child and a fundamental component of human culture.

Fröbel viewed play as the primary mode through which children explore the world, express their inner thoughts, and develop cognitive, social, and emotional skills. He argued that play is an essential part of the natural environment of a child, encompassing both the physical and cultural contexts. In Fröbel's kindergartens, children engaged in structured yet flexible activities that encouraged exploration and creativity. He introduced educational toys, known as gifts (*spielgabe* in German, literally meaning *gift of play*), designed to stimulate imaginative play and conceptual understanding. He believed that through play, children project their inner lives onto the world around them, attributing life and emotions to inanimate objects. This anthropomorphism in play is a crucial developmental stage where children learn to navigate and understand their environment. Fröbel also saw play as a reflection of a child's innate creativity and the seed of human ingenuity, which would later blossom into cultural and artistic expressions.

Fröbel's ideas extended beyond education to encompass the broader cultural significance of play. In his work *Die Menschenerziehung* (Fröbel, 1826), he presented the concept that play is an expression and revelation of the most intimate and profound aspects of humanity. According to Fröbel, play is the germ of human creativity, preceding culture and serving as a generator and characteristic element of it. Through play, individuals manifest their intelligence and freely express their inner selves in response to external demands. He argued that play is one of the most important activities in human life, demonstrating strong individual consciousness and moral development. Unlike animals, whose play is more instinctual, human play involves a high degree of awareness and intentionality. Through play, the good and bad tendencies of individuals are revealed, contributing to the development of personal morality. Furthermore, play serves as an allegory for the obstacles, perils, and difficulties encountered in life, helping individuals prepare for real-world challenges.

Fröbel's educational philosophy can be seen as the precursor to modern understandings of play as fundamental to human development and culture. His emphasis on the importance of play for intellectual and moral development anticipated many contemporary practices that view play as essential for fostering a child's overall growth. Fröbel's work underscores the idea that play is not just beneficial, but fundamental to the development of creativity, problem-solving skills, and social interaction. Moreover, through play, children learn cultural symbols, language, norms, values, and the objects that form the fabric of their culture.

Johan Huizinga's (1938) seminal work, *Homo ludens*, expanded the concept of play beyond childhood, exploring its critical role in the formation of culture and civilization. Huizinga argued that play is a primary aspect of human nature, fundamental to the development of culture and societal norms. He posited that many cultural forms, from art to law to philosophy, originate in playful practices.

While Huizinga's analysis was broader, encompassing all human activities, the foundations laid by Fröbel in recognizing the significance of play in human development and culture cannot be overlooked. The term *homo spieldens* is inspired by Fröbel's insights, and prefigures Huizinga's *homo ludens* by establishing the notion that play is an essential, creative, and formative activity. Fröbel's insights into the educational value of play directly contribute to Huizinga's later, more expansive exploration of play's role in culture.

Fröbel's pioneering ideas on the importance of play in early childhood education have had a lasting impact on educational theory and practice. By emphasizing the integral role of play in developing creativity, intelligence, and moral character, Fröbel set the stage for later thinkers like Huizinga to explore the broader cultural significance of play. The concept of *homo spieldens* recognizes Fröbel's vital contribution to understanding play as a foundational human activity, thereby positioning him as a key precursor to the idea of *homo ludens*. Through Fröbel's work, we see that play is not merely an activity but a profound expression of human potential and creativity, integral to both personal development and cultural formation.

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