

Neoteny, Play, and the Anthropological Difference

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Abstract Human physiology shows many signs of neoteny—delayed physiological development that results in the retention in adulthood of traits normally only seen in the young. With our hairless bodies, large eyes, small jaws, and globular skulls containing large brains, we look more like the juveniles of other ape species than like the adults. This paper explores one common form of juvenile animal behaviour that is more prominent in adult humans than in the adults of other species: play. A notable feature of play is its nonliterality: objects, actions, and other players are treated ‘as if’ they were otherwise than they ordinarily are. Drawing principally on work by Johan Huizinga, as well as Bernard Suits and C. Thi Nguyen, the paper lays out some of the characteristic features of human play and games and argues for the centrality of play in human existence. Notably, human institutions in general bear the mark of the ‘as if’ character that derives from our capacity for play. To the extent that an anthropological difference—a difference that marks humans off from all other animals—is worth noting, on this view, it is more a matter of degree than of kind. Our self-understanding is enriched if we come to see ourselves principally as creatures whose distinctive forms of life are shaped by our capacity for play.