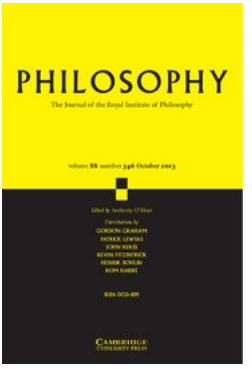

The Role of Play in the Philosophy of Plato

Gavin Ardley

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THE ROLE OF PLAY IN THE PHILOSOPHY OF PLATO

GAVIN ARDLEY

'No human affairs are worth taking very seriously'—*Rep.* x, 604.

1. *Philosophy as playful-seriousness*

WE ARE little accustomed in modern times to think of philosophy in terms of play. With few exceptions, philosophers in the last few centuries are conspicuous for their gravity. If a lighter touch enters their writings it is rather as a douceur with which to punctuate argument. To charge a philosopher with playing games is to condemn his activity as trivial and futile.

Yet, when we take up the Platonic Dialogues we cannot read for long without noticing Plato's association of play (paidia) and serious (spoude). This association is not one of disjunction, but of conjunction even to the point of assimilation. The propriety of the association is a matter of explicit declaration in numerous passages; and the propriety is everywhere taken for granted in the playful-seriousness of Plato's characteristic modes of argument.

Just as some philosophers seek to divorce nature and convention, where Plato seeks to unite them, so Plato opposes the even more prevalent tendency to divorce the playful and the serious. In fact, it seems, Plato everywhere devotes himself to the healing of systematic dualisms, in whatever form they may appear. The healing of the play/serious dualism is the particular subject of this paper.

To claim that Plato seeks to redress all dualities may seem extraordinary. Is not Plato the father of dualisms, notoriously of the body-mind and appearance-reality dualisms? We shall maintain the thesis that such a reading of Plato is mistaken, and that the origin of the mistake lies in a common failure to recognise Plato's playful-seriousness.

For Plato, philosophy is either a joyful game or it is less than nothing. Play is not an incidental sop with which to beguile the reader; it is the very stuff of good argument. Fecundity, genuine seriousness, real understanding, are to be found only in aerial flights of play; without play, our intellectual exertions lead but to fatuous solemnities. In Kierkegaard's phrase, humour is the incognito of life; it enables us to pass through the world without succumbing to the prevailing mood of alternating agitation and hopelessness. Through irony, mimicry, gay satire, and sometimes bitter mockery, Plato shocks, puzzles, and gains rapport with the world in order to redeem that world.

It was said in former days: In Berlin the situation is serious but not desperate; in Vienna it is desperate but not serious. Plato's mood is Viennese. If we ignore Plato's Viennese temper, and read him as a learned indefatigable German might read him, we shall reach only a travesty of Plato's philosophy. We shall be led to see Plato as a fantastical metaphysician in the worst sense of that word. We shall miss what he really is: a unique personality bringing existential 'bite' and relevance to every human circumstance; a man whose motto might well have been: 'above all no zeal'.

2. *Few would-be philosophers have known how to play this game*

The philosophers who have been touched with the spirit of playful seriousness stand out from the multitude who were too serious to be really serious. They are not many in number. Plato was the first. Aristotle comes co-equal, though he keeps his quality more in the background. The patristic writers qualify; though some saw fit to conceal their real lightness of touch under a dour exterior. St Thomas Aquinas: the prolonged agonistic of the *Summa Theologica* is the quintessence of play— a fact which the latter-day systematisers have obscured in their solemn zeal. The Berkeley of the *Principles*, the *Three Dialogues*, the *Alciphron* and the *Siris*: certainly. Kierkegaard: patently. The Thomas Carlyle of *Sartor Resartus*: manifestly. The later Wittgenstein, in spite of, or perhaps because of, the chronic melancholy of his temperament, is not without stirrings. And some of our contemporaries, for instance John Austin and John Wisdom, come near at times to joining the select company.

Such a list cannot, of course, be exhaustive. But it may give some indication of the proper direction to look.

As for those who have endeavoured to recognise explicitly and to trace out historically the play element in philosophy: they are very few. Søren Kierkegaard, Johan Huizinga, Hugo Rahner, and Josef Pieper, are prominent in this re-appraisal of the nature of philosophic endeavour. Kierkegaard excepted, their names seem to be little known in the English-speaking world. And yet, if they are correct in their general contentions, we must re-write the history of philosophy.

3. *Philosophy and Sophistry*

How are we to understand this theme of play and anti-play? Johan Huizinga in his *Homo Ludens* traces the simultaneous apparition of the sophist and the philosopher from the company of the prophet, the medicine-man, the seer, the thaumaturge, and the poet. The sophist's business is a kind of showmanship; he sets out to exhibit his amazing knowledge, and to defeat his rival in public

contest. Sometimes, from this agonistic display, matters of more than passing entertainment emerge as it were by accident: many a witticism comes near to striking a profound note, a moment of insight or disclosure. Hence the beginnings of philosophy proper.

So, Huizinga writes:

> We can sketch the successive stages of philosophy roughly as follows: it starts in the remote past from the sacred riddle-game, which is at one and the same time ritual and festival entertainment. On the religious side it gives rise to the profound philosophy and theosophy of the Upanishads, to the intuitive flashes of the pre-socratics; on the play side it produces the sophist. The two sides are not absolutely distinct. Plato raises philosophy, as the search for truth, to heights which he alone could reach, but always in that aerial form which was and is philosophy's proper element. Simultaneously it develops at a lower level into sophistical quackery and intellectual smartness.[1]

In brief, we might say, there is a great gulf between the art of the prima ballerina in *Swan Lake* and the art of a dancer in a sordid nightclub—a gulf as wide as that between the philosopher and the sophist.

Huizinga goes on to observe how the whole functioning of the medieval university was profoundly agonistic and ludic. And likewise, it would seem, in every productive epoch, in different forms according to the specific genius of that epoch.[2] All knowledge is polemical and agonistic by nature. What emerges from the agon depends on the spirit in which it is conducted.

4. *Eutrapelia*

More specifically: in the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle sketches out his scheme of the moral excellences: these excellences which are distinguished from the intellectual excellences principally by the fact that they cannot be taught, and that they rise up like hills between valleys where dwell the vices.

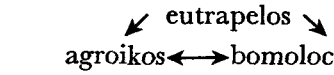
In his scheme, he includes the virtue of eutrapelia (literally, 'happy turning'. *Eth. Nic.* II, vii, 13; IV, viii, 3-4, etc.). The

[1]Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens* (English translation, London 1949), p. 151.

[2]I have contended elsewhere that the birth of the modern exact sciences in the seventeenth century came about not so much by any intellectual *tour de force*, as by virtue of a few people learning to play a new kind of game. They had little conscious notion of what they were about. And the philosophers from Descartes onwards, with few exceptions, because of over-seriousness failed to grasp the situation; instead of gaining insight into the exact sciences, as they purported to do, the philosophers produced nonsensical pseudo-metaphysics. An infusion of paidia would seem to be requisite for any genuine philosophic discourse on the exact sciences.

eutrapelos is the man of autarkeia, of inner serenity and self-sufficiency of disposition, who can strike the right note of mingled seriousness and gaiety, who brings a lightness and gracefulness of touch to every situation.

Flanking the eutrapelos is, on one side, the agroikos, the rustic, the boor, who is too stiff and serious to be a philosopher. On the other side is the bomolochos, the buffoon, who is too frivolous, fawning and random to be a philosopher. The eutrapelos is on the high mean between the two flanking vices: Thus:



Most of us succeed only in oscillating between agroikia and bomolochia, and miss the verticality which leads up to the disposition of eutrapelia.

Eutrapelia is one of the virtues displayed by the man who has attained theoria, the inner activity of contemplation, as Aristotle expounds in the *Ethics*; or schole, the leisured mind, as he prefers to put the matter in the *Politics*. Everything done by the man of schole or theoria is informed by the grace of eutrapelia.

Plato did not express the matter in quite the same terms as Aristotle. But Plato's principles in this matter are so closely akin to Aristotle's, that it is not improper to transpose Aristotle's convenient terms to the Platonic idea of philosophy, where appropriate. By so doing we shall gain much in conciseness at the expense of what we may hope is only a slight dampening of Plato's freedom of movement. Thus, where Plato speaks of the vision of the good, we shall speak of schole or theoria.

5. *The Sophist*

As Plato views the sophist, he is the archetypal demon among human kind. Rhetoricians, tyrants, sensualists, even poets and musicians, may be grievously mischievous, but their dark plumes are borrowed. It is the sophist who is the primordial evil genius.

And what is a sophist? He is a spoiled philosopher. Like a certain proud spirit mentioned in Scripture, the sophist lacks a sense of what is and what is not becoming to a creature, in his case a man. He is the intellectual Pharisee, proud that he is not as other men. He is incapable of tempering the intellectual heights with the saving dash of humility. By aspiring to rise above the human station, he succeeds only in falling below that station: like the pig in the fable who was a good pig until he took to walking upright; when he became, not a better pig, but a ridiculous pig. And the sophist in his fall is determined to pull other men down with him. He is, Plato believes, the enemy of the human race.

In Aristotle's terms, the sophist is one who has slid down from the pinnacle of playful seriousness, eutrapelia, either into the inflexibility of the agroikos, or into the chameleon state of the bomolochos. In fact, both vices, when carried to extremes, converge towards one another. The earnest doctrinaire, the a priorist defending his thesis at all costs, the fawning chameleon, is an intellectual boor or an intellectual buffoon according to the way we choose to look at him.

Plato is scathing about these less than men who know no real play and no real seriousness. Stanley Baldwin was more polite but scarcely less cutting when he remarked: 'The intelligent man is to the intelligentsia as a gentleman is to a gent'.

6. *An interlude: On common sense*

In the eighteenth century reaction against the metaphysical extravagances of the previous century, a number of philosophers appealed to common sense, the common sense of the plain man, to combat the doctrinal absurdities of the bifurcation of nature. Conspicuous in this recall to common sense were Buffier, Reid, Berkeley, and, in one mood, David Hume.

When we examine the manifestos of these philosophers it appears that they understood different things by the term 'common sense'. Buffier and Reid thought in terms of incontrovertible axioms, primordial truths, to be found in common sense. But when they sought to specify these axioms they did not get far before the ground grew treacherous.

Berkeley took up common sense in a different way. He did not search for axiomatic statements, but treated common sense rather as a spring of mental vigour. Looking at Berkeley now after the Wittgensteinian 'break through' (Wittgenstein, attempting a fundamentally similar task to Berkeley, found an audience, whereas Berkeley could get no one to take him seriously), we can see what Berkeley was trying to do, though Berkeley himself found it difficult to express himself articulately on the point: Berkeley was reaching towards the play element in philosophy, and found it in the ability of the plain man to be seriously playful. The man of common sense is the natural grave-merry man, the eutrapelos. The seventeenth-century metaphysicians had destroyed play; they had lost their wits through their learned education, as Berkeley puts it satirically.

Buffier and Reid saw vaguely that common sense was the missing element in philosophy, but never grasped what was the relevant attribute of common sense. They remained too serious, and failed in their reform. Berkeley alone of the eighteenth-century philosophers caught something of the real nature of our mother wit, and thereby succeeded in putting philosophy back on to its perennial basis.

7. *Work and play*

Jest and earnest, playful and serious, are sisters, Plato insists again and again. It was the sophists, the ambitious worldly men, and their victims, the unfortunate depressed multitudes for whom techne had sunk into dull routine (tribe), who had divorced play and earnest. They persisted on keeping them in separate compartments, thereby frustrating both.

The man of schole, of eutrapelia, recognises no such divorce. From his inner citadel of masterly leisure he takes his work as a kind of play. His holiday interludes are places of pause, anapaulai, in which he refreshes himself by play in a different tempo. His life is integral, invigorated by variety, like a musical composition in different movements.

The man who has no schole: for him, work is a serious thing, done for the sake of interludes of play, which interludes are not serious. But here, play and serious have lost their savour. This man's work is a meaningless round; his periods of so-called leisure are merely vacuous interludes of diversion in preparation for a further period of furious work.

The state of ascholia, at least as manifested in the work/play dichotomy, is a disease peculiar to certain human societies, notably the European. So-called 'primitive' men do not seem to be infected by it. For them, work is play, ritual movements, worship. Hence the bewilderment occasioned to 'primitive' man by European intrusion. The bifurcation of life in the so-called 'advanced' cultures is as irrational to the Australian aborigine as it was to Plato.

8. *Inversion of perspective*

How and when this play/serious bifurcation arose, Plato does not profess to know. But that it was rampant among the Greeks of his day is quite apparent. Plato waged a life-long war against the dichotomy, and traced it to its lurking-place in an artificial introversion and reversal of perspective, of which the Cave figure provides an allegory.

The bifurcation is by no means confined to the rude mechanicals. The men of cultivation are perhaps even more prone to slip into the disastrous inversion and dichotomy.

Thus Callicles, a man of quick intelligence, but tragically directed to a selfish public ambition, to dominance over a multitude which he despises—and thus, as Socrates predicts, destined to follow the path of flattery and so of eventual slavery to that multitude—Callicles is ensnared in the bifurcation, to the atrophy within him of both the serious and the playful, and to his ultimate total ruin.

So Callicles rallies Socrates in the *Gorgias* (484):

'Philosophy, Socrates, if pursued in moderation and at the proper age, is an elegant accomplishment. But too much philosophy is the ruin of human life.'[1]

Callicles recognises philosophy as play, but does not recognise its seriousness. He recognises a public career as serious, but does not see the propriety of leavening such a career with a light touch, heedless that misplaced seriousnses leads to vacuity.

That Callicles should be held captive by this dualistic and indigent reading of human nature is evidence that he had things in the wrong perspective: As witness his remark to Socrates, *Gorg.* 481:

'By the gods, tell me Socrates are you in earnest, or only in jest? For if you are in earnest, and what you say is true, is not the whole of human life turned upside down; and are we not doing, as would appear, in everything the opposite of what we ought to be doing?'

To which, Socrates' answer in brief is: 'You're right; one of us has got the world upside down, and it's not me, my friend'.

9. *Dichotomies*

We referred above to the connection of the dichotomy of play and serious with a reversal of scale and a foreshortening of perspective. Just how these are connected is a matter concerning which it is difficult to reach any clearness; and it seems to have been an enigma for Plato. He observes the fact, expresses it in innumerable figures and allegories, and regards the whole concatenation as one of the ultimate mysteries, the real tragedy of human existence. Since Plato's day one aspect of the matter has often been discussed in a slightly different form: the origin of moral evil. But it has always remained at root profoundly mysterious.

What concerns us here is the fact that dualisms appear when perspective is foreshortened and reversed. The dualism of play and serious, the dualism of matter and mind, the cosmic dualism of good and evil principles, the seventeenth-century divorce of appearance and reality, and indeed all systematic bifurcations, seem to be the products of contraction and inversion. Conversion, turning around, in the Cave figure, involves the dispelling of pride, the shock of recognition, the dissolution of all dualisms, and entry into the proper human state.

Where the sophist pronounces a dichotomy, a permanent apartness, the philosopher sees something more like a male and female principle, from the union of which, in love, is born a healthy child, wisdom. Hence the sexual symbolism which runs through the

[1]Citations from Plato are taken, sometimes with emendation, from the standard English versions: Jowett, Lindsay, Taylor, etc.

Platonic Dialogues: the discourses on love of the *Symposium*, Socrates' midwifery in the *Theaetetus*, the marriage arrangements of *Republic* Book v—all would seem to bear on the theme of fruitful unions in contrast to the sophists' homosexual barrenness. The unions of nature and convention, of persuasion and force, of virtue and knowledge, of knowing and not-knowing, of play and serious, are potentially fecund unions actualised through dialectic. The understanding ascends thereby, as if a dolphin had come and taken us up. (*Rep.* v, 453.)[1]

10. *Games*

Let us now see what there is about a game, at its best, which allies it with philosophy.

A game at its best is something played for love, for its own sake. A game is disinterested, an end in itself. As with love, there can be no compulsion or necessity in play: its essence is spontaneity and outgivingness. There must be no professionalism (in the sense in which the professional has gained superior competence at the expense of the amateur virtues), no undue competitiveness, no over-eagerness to win, nor under-eagerness either, or the game degenerates into a sham. A real game is a case of simple timeless enjoyment. Subsequent benefits in health and spirits will properly flow from a game (as worldly benefits will properly associate themselves with the truly just man: *Rep.* x, 612); but they must not be the immediate purpose, or the game will sink to a dreary round.

Here we begin to see the connection of amateur play with the disinterested love of truth, with Plato's vision of the Good, with Aristotle's schole/theoria.

Schole/theoria, declares Aristotle, are attributes of the highest attainment of the human being; they are man's supreme activity; man's most effortless and joyful game, as we might say. It is schole/theoria which make all our subordinate activities intelligible, being the culmination and fulfilment of all properly human activities of lower rank. The divine life, declares Aristotle in *Met.* Λ, is the life of theoria at its highest, a timeless activity of thinking on thinking, at once supreme activity and supreme rest. Man is most alive, and most like unto God, when he possesses and deploys this overflowing activity. He is then the grave-merry man. He moves in the world, simultaneously as a man who loves the world as his home, and as a man of no illusions about the finality of worldly things.

11. *Learning through play*

The possession of inner leisure, especially as manifested in eutra-

[1]This passage from the *Republic* was chosen by Søren Kierkegaard as the motto for his *Concept of Irony*.

pelia, transforms human life. It rescues us from the fallen state, at once frantic and dreary, where we mistake properly subordinate ends for final ends; where we are never satisfied, but are like leaking vessels which cannot be filled; where we are driven to the abject dichotomy of earnest and play, of work and amusement.

Furthermore, it is only those who are capable of playful wonder, those who have the inner citadel of schole, who can learn anything beyond the acquisition of mere knacks. For only in schole can there be community of minds. Schole is the pre-requisite for dialectic, which itself is a kind of play. To attempt dialectic without schole is to produce only futile eristic. In eristic we learn nothing, for our game has ceased to be a game and has degenerated into a sordid competition.

We learn through playing, and only through playing: this is one of Plato's leading themes. We find it in his recommendations for bringing up children by what he calls law-abiding play (*Rep.* iv, 424e; vii, 536d-537a; *Laws* vii, 797, etc.). We find it in Socrates' encounters with the sophists, where, by the play of irony, he endeavours to lighten the pomposities of these ludicrously serious doctrinaires (or alternatively, to put to shame these players of games that are not games), and engage them in real play. We find it again in the ever-ascending play of dialectic between those who have been turned around in the Cave, and are ready to engage in the disinterested play of the mind as it carries them upwards to the authentic human state, to a recognition of the puniness and unseriousness of all human affairs before the towering standard of the ultimate eidos.

12. *A theology of play*

Play has no temporal end beyond itself, but it reaches upwards atemporally; it is fecund, it partakes of *creatio ex nihilo*. Indeed, there is a school of theologians with a long lineage, which endeavours to interpret the creation of the world in terms of play. (On the simple analogy of boys playing cricket in the back-yard on a summer evening.) God has no need of anything outside himself. He creates and sustains the world freely and without necessity in the outgiving spirit of loving play. The world is, as it were, God's playmate; worship is a kind of play, the playful response to an offer to play.[1]

One of the characteristics of play is repetition: we do the same thing over and over again for the sheer love of doing it, whether it be cricket, or playing Bach, or re-telling old stories. Hence the world-order: it is one of endless repetition of joyful movements, it has

[1]Hugo Rahner in his *Man at Play* (English translation, London 1964) provides an admirable sketch of the theology of play.

the regularity of the dance. Hence, too, the possibility of natural science.

It is to this school of theology that Plato belongs, and Aristotle after him. At least, Plato belongs to this school in a measure as full as his Greek limitations would allow. For his notion of creation is timid compared with that of the Hebrews. He has no conception of *creatio ex nihilo* as regards the being of the world, but enters into the notion with zest as regards the world order. His idea of cosmology is that of the rhythmic dance of joy. And his idea of philosophy is analogous: by graceful movements of the understanding, by an ascending game, we rise up from the clay to the Olympian heights; only to find ourselves mysteriously back where we started, but now released from the chains which before held us bound in pseudo-seriousness, now able to play the tragi-comic game of life.

13. *Man as playmate of God*

In the *Laws* i, 644d, Plato enters on a moral fable of the human puppets:

> 'Let us suppose, says the Athenian Stranger, that each of us living creatures is a thauma [toy, marionette] made by the gods: whether for their plaything, or for more serious purpose, we do not know.'

Plato is not here depreciating the human estate. On the contrary, he is enhancing that estate. We are fit to be the companions of God (although we do not as yet know how fully). In the gracefulness of play we associate by mimesis with the deity. Through the Muses we recover something of our lost fellowship with the divine.

In *Laws* vii, 803, the Athenian Stranger explains:

> 'What I wish to say is: that a man ought to apply himself seriously to what is serious, not to what is not serious. That by nature God merits all our blessed zeal [makariou spoudes]. While man, as we said before, has been constructed as a toy for God; and this is the finest thing about him. Thus I say that every man and woman ought to pass through life in this role: playing at the finest and noblest of plays—to the complete inversion of current understanding.'

His next remarks are subtle and compressed. But the gist seems to be: It is the current fancy that work, notably war, is alone serious; that we work in order to play; that play is not serious; that education is properly directed to work. But to look at the matter in this way is to make nonsense of human life. The truth is rather the other way about. It is play which is supremely serious for us, and to it education should be directed. 'We should pass our lives in the playing of games —certain games, that is sacrifice song and dance, and so be able to

gain heaven's grace.' Then we shall take our work in our stride.

What Plato means is that when man looks upward to God his introverted shell is broken, his perspective is reversed, his horizon is unbounded. He can no longer be satisfied with the illusion of an autonomous world economy, as if the whole meaning of the world were contained within itself. Henceforth he sees life as a tragi-comedy not worth taking with deadly gravity, nor yet to be despised as a mere sport, but something to be taken as the eutrapelos takes it, with playful serenity and lightness of heart.

So the Athenian Stranger goes on:

> 'Our nurslings . . . should live out their lives as what they really are, inasmuch as they are puppets [thaumata], for the most part, yet share some little part in truth.'
>
> Megillus the Spartan: 'I must say, sir, you have but a poor estimate of our race'.
>
> The Stranger: 'Bear with me, Megillus. I had God before my mind's eye, and felt myself to be what I have just said. Let us grant, however, if you wish, that the human race is not a mean thing, but merits more serious attention.'

Plato introduces these touches of unmeasure here and there: Socrates for a moment is carried away and becomes too zealous, he offends the etiquette of the game, he breaks the higher logic. Thus in *Rep.* vii, 536, in speaking of the education of the guardians, and with warmth of the ruin to be apprehended if unworthy men, the sophoi, should slip into the royal company, he suddenly pulls himself up:

> 'I made myself ridiculous just now. . . . I forgot that we were playing, and I spoke with too much intensity. For as I spoke I glanced at philosophy, and seeing her so undeservedly spurned and contemned, I think I got angry, and said what I said too severely, as though I had lost my temper with those who are responsible for it.'

Measure, the mean, is the proper rule for conducting the game of life. But our devotion to God breaks through the rules of human play; in devotion to God alone there is no mean.

14. *Play in the Platonic Dialogues*

'I forgot we were playing', says Socrates in *Rep.* vii, 536. The construction of the ideal polis is play. Indeed, the whole of the *Republic* is play, from the opening scene where Socrates is about to return from the Peiraeus to Athens but is pounced upon by Polemarchus and his friends, right through to the closing myth of Er.

The *Republic* is play in the Mozartian manner, in a variety of keys and moods, hovering between grave and gay, sometimes allegro,

sometimes andante; sometimes, as in the latter part of Book i, in partnership with a boorish player, Thrasymachus, the music becomes a wild and abandoned romp, leaving that ferocious man quite exhausted.

The *Laws* likewise is play: play not now in the scintillating spirit of Mozart, but in graver Handelian measures. The three old men as they walk from Knossos up to the cave of Zeus on that memorable mid-summer day beguile their time with discourse; they indulge in the sober old man's game of jurisprudence, as the Athenian Stranger describes it, modelling laws in imagination, making up parables, like elderly men playing a boy's game in a day-dream.

The abstract dialectic of the dialogue *Parmenides* is play: where shall we begin? asks Parmenides (137). What supposition shall we start with? Would you like me, since we are committed to play out this laborious game of the One and the Many, to begin with myself and my own original supposition about the One? This is an echo of a surviving fragment of Parmenides himself: 'It is all one to me where I begin, for I shall come back again there' (*Diels.* fr. 5)—an insouciance appropriate to all dialectical play: play which makes the rounds many times over, constantly lifting the discourse (including the starting point) to successively higher planes of understanding, changing the rules as it goes along.

Plato's myth-making is likewise play; a special kind of imaginative play in the antique mode; a special kind of play which breaks the monotony of more formal measures.

> 'Let us make a new beginning', says the Eleatic Stranger in the *Statesman* (268d), 'and travel by a different road. Let us have a little amusement [paidia] with a famous mythos. . . . Then we may go back on our old path, resuming our series of divisions, until we reach the desired summit.'

When Phaedrus, in the opening scene of the dialogue of that name, asks Socrates whether he believes in the old story of Boreas seizing the maiden Oreithuia from the Ilissus, Socrates replies ironically that he is too much of an atopos [eccentric, paradoxical, a 'natural'] to be an unbeliever like the sophoi. The latter are clever laborious pedants, agroikoi, who waste their time in futile pursuits. They have no ear for the music of the myth.

15. *Learning insensibly*

In play, and in particular in the diversity of play modes, we learn, without at the time knowing that we learn. Thus, in the *Philebus* (30e), Socrates remarks: 'We now have an answer to my enquiry—

that mind is the parent cause of all. . . .' To which his companion replies: 'I have, indeed, and yet I did not observe that you had answered'. And Socrates observes: 'A jest is sometimes refreshing, Protarchus, when it interrupts earnest'.

The game ascends, we learn insensibly, through the stimulation of successive perplexities (aporiai). The aporia is initially a foreign body, a stranger not yet domesticated. The aporia presents us with something not merely to be solved in the flat like a geometrical problem, but rather with a challenge which, when met, invigorates and elevates the whole. By examining credentials and making distinctions, the aporia is surmounted and incorporated; we grow wiser in the process; and the world for us is one stage further towards being a cosmos.

Mounting up step by step from one aporia to another is the mark of genuinely dialectical philosophy. It matters little where we start or what road we take. If we have the love of truth we shall reach the summit all the same.

A doctrinaire, a sophist, a metaphysician in the bad sense, does not mount because he cannot play. He is a professional, not an amateur. Whether he professes to solve problems, or is anguished to find that problems are intractable, it matters little; for he stays always at the same level and grows no wiser. His perplexity is morbid. He knows nothing of lively aporiai. The sophist seeks to possess the world for himself; the philosopher takes it as a gift and returns thanks to the giver.

Plato and Aristotle are the pioneers of aporetic discussion. At each aporia the whole subject is lifted up to the next plane. The discussion does not reach any grand conclusion. But having gone through the cycles, the participants, the players, find themselves unawares, and to their astonishment as it were, on the summit.

Accordingly Socrates in the *Theaetetus* (150-151), reverting to the sexual figure, can say about his whimsical midwifery: 'I bring nothing to birth myself; there is no wisdom in me'. Those who seek my company are full of perplexity (aporia), like women in the pains of labour. To provoke aporiai in others, and together to surmount them; figuratively, creating truly viable brain-children out of nothing; is Socrates' art.

Because dialectic is a game, it requires a number of willing players. Although some men can perform the feat of playing with themselves, like playing patience, it is normally a matter of throwing the ball round a circle. Each member must be a genuine player, or the game is spoilt. The sophoi were the spoil-sports who would not play.

16. *The Cave: unredeemed and redeemed*

We are not all the time engaged in ascending out of the Cave. We must return to the Cave (*Rep.* 519-20). What is dull and cloddish in the unredeemed Cave is leavened and transposed in the redeemed Cave. What would be disastrously unmusical in the hands of the casual, the unfit, the introverted (the prisoners in the Cave), may be proper and indispensable and even musical in the hands of educated men, those who know the natures of what they are dealing with.

Let us take an example to illustrate this recurrent theme: Towards the close of the *Phaedrus*, Socrates takes up the subject of the written word. Writing is a disastrous invention, he considers, in the hands of the unwary. With its fixed stare, like a statue, writing is a poor substitute for the real play of the spoken word in dialectic. Only the spoken word, like the royal man, can be eutrapelos. Writing corresponds to the tyrant.

Writing makes a seductive appeal to the temporal memory, but in so doing it blots out the a-temporal memory (what in the earlier Dialogues is called anamnesis), the capacity to understand aerial truth, to grasp perennial standards. Writing depresses the human condition and induces a disguised form of idolatry. Writing gives the appearance of conveying truth, but it is more like cosmetics on an aged face. Or, to change the figure, writing is like the Gardens of Adonis: the boxes of forced flowers put out on the window-sills for the Athenian festival, flowers which bloom for a few days and then are no more. No farmer of serious intent would plant his crops on this ephemeral principle.

Yet, while writing is a hazard for the unprepared, leading them to think they have what they have not, it can be proper and useful and even indispensable for the prepared. The condition for its proper employment is that we don't take it too seriously: The philosopher will write by way of pastime (paidia) making a temporal record for the delight of his old age, and for all such as come after him—like the farmer who by way of pastime plants a garden of Adonis for the temporal delectation of himself and his friends.

It is evident that Plato, when he wrote his Dialogues, had this well in mind, and composed them in as sylph-like a manner as he could, in order to discourage the unmusical from fastening on to them and making a dull travesty of his grace.

17. *Plato's severities*

Anything is permissible if it can be treated as genuine play, if it is capable of partaking in rhythm and harmony. What is intrinsically unmusical should be shunned by all as evil. But even those things capable of being musical should be taken up only by those who can

render them musical. Others should leave them alone lest they be a stone of stumbling. Hence the apparent severity of many of Plato's half-serious half-whimsical strictures, particularly in the *Republic*.

The serious and the playful are sisters. Through their association in contrariety, through the aporiai engendered thereby, the intelligence is set in motion. The proper handling of this ascending counterpoint is the key to education. The maintenance of the fugue is no easy matter: we so readily run after one contrary to the exclusion of the other.

The comic side of life, if we become absorbed in it, is stultifying, because we have begun to treat it seriously in a closed order; we forget that the discords which provoke laughter get their point from something which is not discord.

Conversely, the tragic side of life, if we become so absorbed in it, is stultifying, because we are beginning to take the world with too much gravity, as if human affairs were worth taking seriously as ends in themselves in a closed order; we forget that the tragic impasse is not an ultimate impasse.

A man must get to know the comic, says the Athenian Stranger in *Laws* 816, so that he might never be betrayed by ignorance into doing or saying a ludicrous thing when it is out of place. But he must not go to the other extreme and let himself be a mere comic.

Similarly we must not take the tragic too seriously. Thus, Socrates in *Rep.* x, 608, at the end of the talk on the ancient quarrel between philosophy and poetry:

> 'Let us repeat to ourselves as a charm this argument of ours and this incantation, for fear of falling again into that childish love [of tragic performances] which is still shared by the many. We shall chant, therefore, that this poetry is not to be taken seriously as though it were a solemn performance which had to do with truth, but that he who hears it is to keep watch on it, fearful for the city in his soul, and that we must lay down these laws concerning poetry which we have described.'

The notion of contrapuntal education is Plato's contribution to a problem which Aristotle attacked in a blunter way through the ancient doctrine of the mean. The two expressions are consonant. Playful seriousness is the way in which we attain the mean. Plato is looking to the way, Aristotle to the end. But Aristotle's mean is limited to human affairs. Towards God there is no mean; the fugue finally resolves itself in completion. So, Plato's unmeasured vehemence when, as he says, he is looking directly to the last end. Hence, 'hymns to the Gods and praises of good men' (*Rep.* 607) are the only specimens of poetry which occasion Plato no anxiety lest they be

misused: for they of their nature transcend the mean, they alone may properly go beyond the conventions of the game.

18. *Plato and the dramatists*

We may now be in a position better to understand Plato's attitude to Greek tragic drama—a matter which has, it would seem, been much misunderstood by reading over-rigid categories into the *Republic* and losing sight of the nuances in which the truth lies.

The Greek drama is constructed around law, around diké, hubris, and nemesis; its Gods are anthropomorphic. The world of the drama is artificial and introverted. It has little sense of the wayward, the incalculable, the mysterious, the infinite. It is unrelievedly serious about things whose natures are distorted by taking them so seriously. It creates emotional tension higher than is meet for things of human stature; ugly emotions stemming from ugly theology. It lacks the astringent counterpoint of irony, the sense of the ridiculous, which could render it genuinely human. It does not see through the masks of life, but is engrossed in its own narrowly regulated world.

The Greek drama is mimetic in a foreshortened sense. It does not ascend. The rules, as a festival agon, are fixed. It does not, like dialectic, encounter a genuine aporia and surmount it, i.e. change its rules as it goes along. It has instead a fixed stare, like the fixed doctrines of the sophists; it is heavily didactic and metaphysical in an oppressive sense. It keeps the audience childish.

When we see or read Greek tragedy today we do not find it as oppressive as Plato apparently felt it. This, it would seem, is because of the growth of a moral infra-structure over the last two and a half thousand years; an infra-structure which we take for granted, of which we are scarcely conscious. This infra-structure makes a great difference. We can take the Greek drama lightly because we have an inner reserve. Plato himself, it would appear, possessed by anticipation something of this reserve; few of his compatriots did; hence his scorn and anxiety.

Tragedy becoming dominant before the establishment of strong standards in self and polis inhibits the attainment of those standards. When these standards are firmly implanted we may entertain the poets with more safety—as a serious amusement, as Plato himself foreshadows.

When we compare the Greek tragedians with Shakespeare we find ourselves in different worlds. Shakespeare's kaleidoscopic world is open vertically, the Greek tragedians' world is confined to a horizontal plane. Shakespeare is the kind of poet whom Plato hoped for; but it required some two millenia of preparation before reaching the kairos, the appointed time, when the advent of a Shakespeare was

possible. Shakespeare had a spirit like Plato's: he too was one who saw the sisterhood of the playful and serious and the aerial ascent resulting therefrom. Shakespeare's tragedies go beyond tragedy as the Greek dramatists understood it. Shakespeare sensed that tragedy is not the final reading of life; the conflict is resoluble, if not always explicitly resolved, by a vertical movement.

The novels of Sir Walter Scott are illuminating *vis-à-vis* Plato. *The Heart of Midlothian* is a splendid story until a point about two thirds of the way through. Then suddenly Scott's spirit flagged, and except for occasional passages thereafter, the novel is dull and mechanical. At his worst, Scott is mimetic in the sense which Plato abhorred, in the closed wooden sense of the Greek drama, lacking even the Greek ability to conceal this poverty by great emotional tension (or, more justly, scorning such an artifice). At his best, however, Scott is mimetic in the full playful aporetic sense in which Plato delighted; rejoicing in the rich diversity of things, each thing with its own unique business in the world.

To take a hackneyed but relevant illustration from another field, we sense a similar transition in architecture. The Greek temple at its best, in the Parthenon, is perfect of its kind—the kind where the measured is all, and the measureless is forbidden. There is no play in Greek temple architecture. It is perfect on its own terms, which are those of resolute agroikia.

Contrast the Greek temple with the Gothic cathedral: the latter is play in stone, yet not play run wild, but play in counterpoint with serious. From the Greek architects to the medieval architects there has been an infusion of that which transcends the mean, an infusion which made eutrapelia possible.

Once more, we can admire the Greek temple without feeling oppressed because we do not let it dominate us; we have the requisite resources to master its spell. It has become for us what Plato would call an amusement. But when Plato looked from the Academy Gardens up to the Parthenon he must have felt that structure weighing down on the citizens of Athens and keeping them earth-bound. The Parthenon is perfect in its way, but that way is tragic: a noble fly in a noble fly-bottle.

19. *Plato, the master of mimes*

When we go through the Platonic dialogues, particularly the *Republic*, prepared in this way, the conventional commentaries look like a cake that has collapsed when some well-meaning but clumsy person has opened the oven door; or like Carlyle's German Baron who took to leaping on tables and answered that he was learning to be lively.

Plato's forte, particularly in *Republic*, *Gorgias* and *Phaedrus*, is miming, making up revealing caricatures, often homoeopathic—a little absurdity to humble a greater absurdity. Irony and humour release us from our solemn obsessions by inviting us to play; somewhat like the rescue of the unhappy man in Wittgenstein's room: hammering on the walls, can't get out, when the door is open behind him all the time if only he could be induced to turn around.

The mimes of the latter part of *Rep.* i are put in rapid succession before the truculent Thrasymachus. Taken literally, and out of context, they are wildly sophistical; but they are calculated to bring shame, and cure by homoeopathy—like Socrates' comic first speech on love in the *Phaedrus*, which makes game of Lysias by pretending to take him seriously.

The mimes of the *Gorgias* on cookery and medicine, which bring out Plato's moral insights, should prepare us for the mimes of *Rep.* iii. The 3rd Book of the *Republic* is not highly regarded by commentators: they see in it for the most part only extravagant and highly dubious observations about music, poetry and acting. But, unless our argument is seriously astray, *Rep.* iii contains some of Plato's richest mimes.

As soldiers lead to our first ideas about guardians; as dogs lead to the first ideas about educating guardians; so the foibles of diction and music are the first intimations of the sophistical perils surrounding us.

In 392 begins a discussion of poetry in simple narration or imitative narration, with much shaking of the head over the evils of the imitative art. Taken at face value, this seems to be straining at gnats, and has given rise to much mystification about the expulsion of the imitative poets from the city; and even to the elaboration of theories to the effect that Plato would countenance only abstract art: which is as sensible as an earnest man who writes a treatise on the state of speleology in ancient Athens from the evidence of the Cave figure in Book vii.

In truth, it would seem, Plato in *Rep.* iii is in a thoroughly naughty Carlylian mood. As Carlyle in *Sartor Resartus* advances his convictions about the world through a preposterous philosophy of clothes—a discourse which might at times have a faint bearing in serious vein about literal clothes—so Plato in *Rep.* iii plays his way upwards through a more or less wry game with the poets. What he seems to be aiming at eventually is to identify the arch enemy, the kolakikos, the flatterer and fawner, who keeps men mean and low; the figure of the sophist, the anti-body in the human scene.

This interpretation seems to be confirmed when, a little later (399), he takes up the subject of music and announces that many-stringed

and many-keyed instruments should be forbidden the city in favour of Apollo's simple instrument. Only the hardiest of pedants would seriously delve here into Athenian musicology.

What could the many-stringed instrument be, but a mime of the sophist, who can speak in a hundred voices, and bemuse and reduce all and sundry by his flattery? And Apollo's lyre: who but the philosopher?

> 'If there comes to our city a man so wise that he can turn into everything under the sun and imitate every conceivable object . . . we shall do obeisance to him as to a sacred, wonderful, and agreeable person; but we shall say that we have no such man in our city, and the law forbids there being one, and we shall anoint him with myrrh, and crown him with a wreath of sacred wool, and send him off to another city.' (398.)

Even the most reprobate of poets, or the most seductive of musicians, could scarcely bear the weight of this indictment. It is aimed at the archetypal kolakikos.

Sometimes Plato casts his playful mimes into the stricter measures of analogy of proportion, the most explicit being the divided line of *Rep.* vi. We cannot pursue them here. Pierre-Maxime Schuhl has explored a number of them in his *La Fabulation Platonicienne*; but not, surprisingly, those of *Rep.* iii.

Instead of speaking of Plato's mimicry, we could use the term 'model'. The latter is a term which has been brought into prominence in recent years by those seeking to understand the evolution of the exact sciences since their eruption in the seventeenth century. This appears to be on the right path; it is certainly a great advance on the efforts of those arch-agroikoi, from Descartes onwards, who have cast our understanding of the exact sciences into well-nigh impenetrable darkness through total neglect of the play element in the sciences.

We may suspect, nevertheless, that the notion of 'model' is in danger of languishing through being taken too seriously by the philosophers. The serious needs to be joined with the playful before it can kindle. Those who practise the exact sciences perform this marriage with consummate skill, at an infra-conscious level. Newton's secret was his proficiency at a new mode of serious play. The right company for Newton is Shakespeare. But this, as Aristotle would say, is another question, and we cannot go further into it here.

University of Auckland, New Zealand