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## PLAY AND SERIOUSNESS: PLATO AND ARISTOTLE

### Abstract

*The paper begins with a contrast between two competing paradigms of play: the child and the adult athlete. It then argues that Plato rejects the former but strongly affirms the latter as a model of philosophy – indeed, of the best human life – itself. By contrast, Aristotle rejects both conceptions of play. He is an entirely serious man.*

### 1. Competing Paradigms of Play

We begin with play. Two quite different models can be summoned to represent it. The first is offered by Heraclitus, and then embraced by Nietzsche centuries later.

“Lifetime (*aión*) is a child playing (*país paizón*) [...] the kingdom is in the hands of a child.”<sup>1</sup>

Oblivious to serious concerns, (young) children spontaneously move forward with no goal in mind. Unburdened by rules or structure, interested in whatever comes their way, laughing and fueled by imagination, immersed in the present and free from regret or anxiety, children just play. As such, the *país paizón* exemplifies the Heraclitean worldview, one which is bereft of stable purpose or configuration, and which is best imaged by the flow of a river into which no one can step twice. Nietzsche explains:

“In this world only play, play as artists and children engage in it, exhibits coming-to be and passing away, structuring and destroying, without any moral additive, in forever equal innocence.”<sup>2</sup>

At play, aiming to achieve nothing (“innocent”), the child symbolizes a world in which there is no stable reality, no being, no telos... only becoming. Nietzsche elaborates on Heraclitus’ behalf:

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<sup>1</sup> This is a deliberate mistranslation of the Diels B52 fragment of Heraclitus. It left out *pessuon*, “playing drafts.” Including this word would (rightfully) cloud the purported affinity I am claiming holds between Heraclitus and Nietzsche. Let it be understood, then, that this paper will operate with a Nietzschean conception of Heraclitus in this section, and will disregard the question of whether it is historically accurate.

<sup>2</sup> F. NIETZSCHE, *Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks*, Engl. transl. by M. Cowan, Chicago IL: Regnery Gateway, 1962, p. 62.

“I see nothing other than Becoming. Be not deceived. It is the fault of your myopia, not of the nature of things, if you believe you see land somewhere in the *ocean* of coming-to-be and passing. You use names for things as though they rigidly, persistently endured; yet even the stream into you step a second time is not the one you stepped into before.”<sup>3</sup>

Nietzsche acknowledges that this essential Heraclitean thought – everything flows, nothing, not even the dear self, abides – can lead to despair.

“The everlasting and exclusive coming-to-be [...] which constantly acts and comes-to-be but is [...] is a terrible, paralyzing thought. Its impact on men can most nearly be likened to the sensation during an earthquake when one’s loses one’s familiar confidence in a firmly grounded earth.”<sup>4</sup>

Nonetheless, it is possible, he thinks, to transform the potentially paralyzing thought of radical becoming “into its opposite, into sublimity and the feeling of blessed astonishment.”<sup>5</sup> And this is precisely what the *país paizôn* does. Amazed by the world, active and alive, released from the burden of a formulated life plan, the child just plays. No surprise, then, that the first of Zarathustra’s speeches begins thus:

“Of three metamorphoses of the spirit I tell you: how the spirit becomes a camel; and the camel, a lion; and the lion, finally, a child.”

After bearing the burdens of its own culture (camel), and then destroying the values that structure it (lion), the spirit reaches its greatest height.

“But say, my brothers, what can the child do that even the lion could not do? Why must the preying lion still become a child? The child is innocence and forgetting, a new beginning, a play (*ein Spiel*), a self-propelled wheel, a first movement, a sacred ‘Yes.’”<sup>6</sup>

For Nietzsche, then, the *país paizôn* represents both Heraclitean Becoming as well as the most affirmative human response to Becoming. Insofar as the child is counted as paradigmatically playful, this is the worldview lurking behind it.

The second paradigm is the adult at play. Typically this means playing games tightly structured by rules, which in turn establish precisely what is missing in the play of a child: an end, goal or *telos*. Athletes, for example, compete for a prize and so strive to win. To do so they must play by the rules. In basketball two points are awarded when the ball goes through the hoop, and players are not allowed to use their feet to kick the ball. In football one point is given when the ball goes into the goal, and players are not allowed to handle the ball. (By contrast, a child with a ball feels free to use hands or feet or nose to move it.) Such games have strict spatial and temporal boundaries. A

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 52.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 54.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 54.

<sup>6</sup> F. NIETZSCHE, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Engl. transl. by W. Kaufman, New York NY: Vintage, 1973, pp. 137 and p. 139. I substitute “play” for Kaufman’s “game,” a move which is warranted by the German *spiel*.

basketball game lasts for 48 minutes and its court is 94 feet long and 50 feet wide. Such constraints are required in order for the game to take place. For they establish what counts as victory, and thereby make it possible for the athletes to compete against each other<sup>7</sup>.

The temporal and spatial limitations of an athletic competition are artificial, and they create a play-world whose meaning is entirely insular. A basketball hoop is placed precisely 10 feet above the floor. While it could not be 100 feet, since that would be beyond the capacity of a player to reach it, it could just as well be 9 or 11. A football game lasts 90 minutes. It could not last 900, for this would be beyond human endurance. But it could be 85. In short, the rules of a game, and therefore the *telos* they constitute, are not only artificial but (relatively) arbitrary. They generate a self-contained space in which certain physical movements are allowed and others are forbidden. As a result, a game can look absurd to an external observer. Why should grown men and women strive so intensely to put a ball through a hoop that just happens to be 10 feet above the floor? Why shouldn't they be allowed to kick it? Why should they care so much about scoring more points than their opponents after exactly 48 minutes of play? After all, doing so has no meaning or value outside of the strictly conventional, and radically temporary, arena in which the athlete competes.

For this reason, the overwhelming majority of athletes – those who are “amateurs” (from the Latin *amare*) and play neither for riches nor fame but simply for “love” of the game – quickly forget the results of a competition. And this discloses the extraordinary feature of athletic play. Within the confined space and time of the play-world, athletes – from the Greek *athlon*, “prize” – struggle passionately. They “agonize” – from the Greek *agôn*, “contest” – for they are entirely concentrated on winning. In this sense, they are serious. But the *telos* of their sometimes furious activity is not serious. Putting a ball through a hoop that just happens to be 10 feet above the floor has no significance outside of the enclosures of the play-world. For this reason, then, taking it seriously is absurd. And yet taking it seriously, at least while they are playing, is precisely what athletes must do. In short, this second paradigm is a blend of seriousness and play. And the result is precarious. The temptation to take the game too seriously – to cheat or hurt the opponent, or to risk injury to oneself – is ever present. After all, victory is the *telos*. So too may the athlete be tempted to dismiss the outcome as meaningless and so unworthy of concentrated effort. After all, victory is determined by an arbitrary conglomeration of rules. But the athlete who does not try to win is not really playing the game. For the goal is victory and so the athlete, however unserious the goal may actually be, must seriously compete.

The following sections of this paper will argue for this thesis: for Plato the athlete, not the child, is the paradigm of play. And this he valorizes. Indeed, for Plato serious play is the model of human beings at their best. By contrast, Aristotle is dismissive of play in either of its paradigmatic manifestations.

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<sup>7</sup> Note that “competition” is derived from the Latin *com*, “with,” and *petere*, “strive, struggle.”

## 2. Platonic Play

In Book 7 of the *Laws*, rather near its center, the Athenian Stranger makes the following comment.

“I assert that what is serious (*to spoudaion*) must be treated seriously (*spoudazein*), and what is not serious should not, and that by nature god is worthy of a complete blessed seriousness, but that what is human, as we said earlier, has been devised as a certain plaything (*paigion*) of god, and that this is really the best thing about it. Every man and woman should spend life in this way, playing (*paizonta*) the most beautiful games (*paidias*)” (803c)<sup>8</sup>.

This pronouncement is startling because the Athenian Stranger hardly seems to be a playful man. The *Laws* is a monumental and laborious dialogue that rarely if ever seems to deviate from utmost seriousness. (The Greek for “serious,” *spoudaion*, is derived from *spendein*, “to urge on, hasten, quicken.”) Nonetheless, in the passage above the Athenian counsels us to spend our lives in play! Quickly, however, he qualifies this pronouncement.

“Of course, the affairs of human beings are not worthy of great seriousness, yet it is necessary to be serious about them. And this is not a fortunate thing” (803b).

Human beings are constrained by some sort of necessity to be serious about what is not worthy of being taken seriously: namely, ourselves. And this is unfortunate. It is also puzzling. Perhaps, though, the Athenian offers us a clue in his next remark.

“Don’t be amazed, Megillus, but forgive me! For I was looking away toward the god and speaking under the influence of that experience, when I said what I did just now. So let our race be something that is not lowly then, if that is dear to you, but worthy of a certain seriousness” (804b).

The Athenian was “looking away” from the human (political) world and toward the god when he offered his stunning encomium to play at 803b-c. And then he caught himself, and apologized. He next issued an imperative to himself, apparently to appease Megillus: because we must, “let our race,” he says, be taken seriously. He forces himself to return to the serious business of city planning on which he has been embarked since the beginning of the dialogue. He forces himself to take seriously what is not in fact serious. As such, he is rather like an athlete playing basketball. Should the player’s mind wander to other concerns, should she “look away” from the court, she may well feel the game to be pointless. She may laugh at herself and her fellow competitors for taking such an absurd exercise so seriously. On the one hand, this would be appropriate. After all, it is only within the insularity of the basketball court that her activities have any meaning at all. But, *qua* athlete, she must resist the temptation to disengage. To compete well she

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<sup>8</sup> All citations from the *Laws* are from the Engl. transl. by T. Pangle, Chicago IL: University of Chicago Press, 1984. Some of the material in this section was developed in my essay, “The ‘Serious Play’ of Book 7 of Plato’s *Laws*,” in G. RECCO-E. SANDAY (eds.), *Plato’s Laws: Force and Truth in Politics*, Bloomington IN: Indiana University Press, 2013, pp. 144-154.

cannot be anywhere but on, and cannot look to anything but, the court where victory can be won. She must take this seriously. She must not laugh<sup>9</sup>.

The Athenian Stranger's admonition to take seriously what is not serious is reminiscent of Socrates. Consider, for example, what Alcibiades says about him in the *Symposium*: he "lives his whole life being ironic and playing (*paizōn*) with human beings" (216e). He pretends, for example, to take beautiful young men like Alcibiades seriously, when in fact he "holds them in contempt" (216d) and counts them as "nothing" (216e). As such, he practices what the Athenian preaches.

Or consider what Socrates himself says in Book VII of *The Republic*. After having completed his outline of the subjects future rulers of his city (in speech) must study – arithmetic, plane geometry, solid geometry, harmonics and dialectic – he turns to the question, "to whom shall we give these studies?" (535a).<sup>10</sup> He insists that only "the steadiest and most courageous" (535a) among the young citizens should be educated at the highest level in order to become leaders of the city. Their most important qualification, however, is that they show a "keenness at studies." They must have sharp minds, strong memories, and the ability to "learn without difficulty" (535b) in order to master the demanding curriculum Socrates has just proposed.

Socrates then digresses. He mentions the problems infecting philosophy as it is actually practiced in the Athens of his day; what he calls the "current mistake in philosophy" (535c). Its glaring deficiency is that unworthy men have donned its mantle. For only those who are "straight of limb and understanding" (536b) can become genuine philosophers, and these are hard to find in flesh-and-blood Athens. At this point, Socrates catches himself.

"But I seem to have been somewhat ridiculously affected just now [...] I forgot [...] that we were playing (*epaizomen*) and spoke rather intensely. For, as I was talking I looked at Philosophy and, seeing her undeservingly spattered with mud, I seem to have been vexed and said what I had to say too seriously (*spondaioteron*)" (536c).

The Athenian Stranger in the *Laws* "was looking away toward the god;" that is, he had forgotten that he was engaged in a serious, albeit all too narrowly human, political discussion. As a result he denigrated human beings as unworthy of serious concern. But then he caught and corrected himself. Similarly, in the *Republic* Socrates "looked at" the current condition of Philosophy, got carried away by his indignation, and then caught himself becoming too serious. In both cases, the precarious blend of seriousness and play was momentarily disrupted when each speaker became distracted.

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<sup>9</sup> For this reason, Dostoyevski seems quite wrong when he says the following about the game of chess: "Man is a frivolous and incongruous creature, and perhaps, like a chess player, loves the process of the game, not the end of it. And who knows (there is no saying with certainty), perhaps the only goal on earth to which mankind is striving lies in this incessant process of attaining, in other words, in life itself, and not in the thing to be attained." This passage from Dostoyevski's *Notes From the Underground* is used as the epigraph in P. KATSAFANAS's book *Agency and the Foundation of Ethics: Nietzschean Constitutivism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2013.

<sup>10</sup> All citations from the *Republic* are from the Engl. transl. by A. Bloom, New York NY: Basic Books, 1969.

To reinforce this point: the *Republic* seems to be a serious attempt to formulate a blueprint of a perfectly just city. Nonetheless, Socrates confesses that “it doesn't make any difference whether it is or will be somewhere” (592b). In other words, the game “we were playing,” the *telos* of which has been the construction of a perfectly just city in speech, is not an entirely serious enterprise. And yet neither is it entirely playful, at least not in the Nietzschean sense. Instead, Socrates is much like the athlete. Playing hard, trying to win, even if victory makes no difference.

Consider this simple fact: several dialogues are set in a gymnasium, the place where “naked” (*gymnos*) men engage in athletic competition. For example, having just returned from the battle at Potidea, Socrates immediately goes to the “wrestling school of Taureas,” which he describes as one of his “customary haunts” (153a). The *Lysis* opens with him heading to the “Lyceum” (203a), a gymnasium and meeting place. He is intercepted by Hippothales who brings him to another “wrestling school” (204a). And it is to the Lyceum again that he heads immediately after having drunk Agathon and Alcibiades under the table in the *Symposium*. The presence of the athlete looms large in these dialogues.

Still, and obviously so, a great deal more textual evidence and argumentation would be required to substantiate the claim that Plato actually takes the paradigm of the athlete seriously. For now, let it stand simply as a proposal that he does. In a similar fashion, the subsequent arguments will also be only thinly defended. The best they can hope for, then, is to be suggestive.

Just as Heraclitean Becoming is the worldview lying behind his (and Nietzsche's) valorization of the *país paizôn*, so too is there a Platonic worldview lying behind the athlete construed as the paradigm of play. To describe it schematically: the *telos* of Platonic philosophy is to give a *logos*, a rational account, of the Ideas, the salient feature of which is their ontological independence. But the ontological independence of the Ideas can never be conclusively demonstrated. Therefore, the *telos* of Platonic philosophy is irremediably elusive. Yes, it should be taken seriously but, because it can never be definitively attained, it should be leavened with a healthy dose of playfulness.

Consider the *Symposium*. Speaking through the person of Diotima, Socrates describes the Idea of the Beautiful as follows:

“First of all, it always is, and it neither comes to be nor perishes, neither grows nor decreases. Nor is it beautiful in one way, but ugly in another. Nor does it exist at one time but at another time it does not exist. Nor is it in relation to the beautiful but also in relation to the ugly. Nor is it here beautiful and there ugly, or beautiful to some but ugly to others [...] instead, it is itself in virtue of itself with itself, singularly formed, and it always is. All other beautiful things participate in it” (211a-b).

The Idea of Beautiful (or Beauty Itself) depends on nothing other than itself. By contrast, all beautiful (particular) things depend on it. While a beautiful painting or sunset comes and goes, The Idea of the Beautiful is permanent, absolutely stable and objective. It is, therefore, the highest object of the philosopher's striving, of his *erôs*. There is, however, a problem: precisely because, as Diotima emphatically says, the Idea is the ultimate object of the philosopher's erotic longing, it is impossible to determine whether its reality is in fact fully objective (independent) or not. For *erôs* has the power to cloud the judgment of the lover (*erastês*). In turn, the lover may well be driven to

exaggerate and thereby distort the beauty of the beloved. Hippothales in the *Lysis*, for example, has been driven “mad” (*mainetai*: 205a) by his love for Lysis, a nice boy, to be sure, but hardly worth the hyperbolic praise Hippothales lavishes upon him.

This impulse to magnify the beauty of the beloved is a possibility intrinsic to *erôs*, and it is illustrated in the prologue of the *Symposium*. The bulk of the dialogue is narrated by Apollodorus, a man who for three years has been spending most of his time with Socrates and, as he says, “making it my concern to know what he says and does every day.” He is not only obsessively devoted to Socrates, he is convinced that prior to his own initiation into (what he takes to be) philosophy he was “utterly miserable” (172e). So too, he thinks, is everyone else who is not a philosopher. It is clear that his companion (Glaucón) has heard this fervent refrain from Apollodorus many times, and that he is quite tired of it. What he wants is not a diatribe but an account of what transpired during the famous dinner party hosted by Agathon. Apollodorus, however, was not there himself. But he did hear the story from one of the attendees, Aristodemus, a man rather similar to himself. For he too was a “lover” (*erastês*: 173b) of Socrates. Indeed, he went so far as to go “barefoot” (173b) in mimetic homage to his famously shoeless master. Apparently Aristodemus memorized the speeches that were given at the party.

In Apollodorus and Aristodemus, two strikingly unimpressive human beings whose only distinction is their mindless devotion to Socrates, we see the epistemic risk inherent in erotic longing. Simply put, lovers can exaggerate the beauty of the beloved. On the other hand, it is only because these two men are madly in love with Socrates that they bothered to pay such close attention to him. In turn, it is only because of them that we know what happened at Agathon’s house (if, in fact, their reports are truthful). In other words, *erôs* can be both an epistemic positive – it can supply the necessary energy to keep the lover’s view concentrated on the erotic object – and a potential impediment: it can lead to the sort of hyperbole spouted by Hippothales. The lover can either see the beloved clearly through a lens highly focused through erotic energy, or through a kaleidoscope that distorts the nature of its object.

To approach this same point from a different angle, consider Socrates’ examination of Agathon in the *Symposium* (199c-201c). Through this *elenchos*, Socrates formulates his own conception of *erôs* by articulating four of its essential features (which I paraphrase). First, it is always “of something.” When S loves, S loves some P. *Erôs* is, in other words, intentional. Second, P is not possessed by S. When S is hungry and desires to eat, it is because he lacks food. (Why “desires” has replaced “loves” will be discussed shortly.) *Erôs* is negative. This statement, however, cannot quite stand as is, for there is an obvious counterexample to it. If S now possesses health, S may still desire to be healthy. To put the point more generally: if S possesses P, S may still love P because S does not possess P permanently. S may well desire to retain P as time passes. This, then, is the third feature of *erôs*: it is a response to temporality. Human beings are caught in the flow of time. We are ephemeral, incomplete, and aware of our incompleteness, which in turn we strive to overcome. We are continually lacking and so we are continually loving.

These three features all rest on a fourth, which is simply assumed throughout Socrates’ account. *Erôs* is a desire, a going after its object. It is a motive force, for it

impels the one loving to pursue, to move toward, a beloved or desired object. It is, then, essentially “epithumotic” (from the Greek *epithumia*, “desire.”)

Because *erôs* is “epithumotic” and negative, and what is ultimately lacking in human experience is permanence, what human beings love most of all, even if they are hardly aware of doing so, is permanence itself. For this reason *erôs* is, in Diotima’s words, “love of immortality” (207a). The most basic human longing is to transcend temporality, to jump out of our own skins and become like a god. But this we, embodied beings that we are, cannot do. Nonetheless, it is that for which we strive<sup>11</sup>.

Like the prologue of the *Symposium* and Hippothales’ foolishness in the *Lysis*, this account suggests that the danger of distorting the nature of the erotic object is intrinsic to *erôs*. Because we are aware of our transience, we desire permanence. Even if this statement is true, it does not imply that there actually are any permanent objects in the universe. Human beings may simply wish that there were or believe that there are.

In this context, consider what Socrates says when he introduces the Idea of the Good in Book VI of the *Republic*: it is “what every soul pursues and for the sake of which it does everything” (505d). Human beings strive for what is Good. This is a psychological observation and not a description of an entity that is ontologically independent. Even if it is true, it does not imply that an Idea or anything else simply is Good. Socrates’ statement only discloses an essential feature of human beings and their (erotic) longings. A few pages later, the Idea of the Good (or simply, as at 508b, “the Good”) is indeed described in terms of its ontological independence. It is the cause of “existence (*to einai*) and being (*ousia*),” but is itself somehow “beyond being, exceeding it in dignity” (509b). In the language of the divided-line, it is “free from hypothesis at the beginning of the whole” (511b). It depends on nothing other than itself. But, to reiterate, it was initially broached only as the supreme object of human striving. For this reason, then, its ontological status is ambiguous. Plato leaves open the possibility that the Idea of the Good may be a wish projection.

To sum up so far: the Platonic philosopher seeks to understand and articulate the permanent structures of reality; namely, the Ideas. But time and again Plato suggests that unimpeded epistemic access to the Ideas is hardly a given. Their essential attribute is that they are ontologically independent, but there is no guarantee that they are not somehow infected, even generated by, by the erotic energy of the philosopher who loves and pursues them. Because we are temporal beings acutely aware of the transience of all we hold dear (including ourselves), we crave permanence, and so are tempted to say that something just is, and neither comes to be nor passes away. But maybe there is not. For this reason, in pursuing the Ideas – that is, in the practice of philosophy – it would be a mistake to forget that, as Socrates put it, “we [are] playing.” At the same, however, and precisely like the athlete immersed in a competitive game, it would be an equal mistake to dismiss philosophical activity as unserious. Instead, what is needed is a delicate and precarious blend of seriousness and play. The athlete helps show us what this might be.

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<sup>11</sup> See D. ROOCHNIK, *Retrieving the Ancients*, London: Blackwell, 2006, pp. 135-157, for a full elaboration of these ideas.



### 3. Aristotelian Seriousness

Unlike his teacher, Aristotle seems to be entirely serious, and thoroughly dismissive of play. A passage from *Nicomachean Ethics* X.6 certainly suggests as much.

“Happiness (*eudaimonia*), therefore, does not consist in play (*paidia*). For it would be strange if our end (*telos*) were play, and if we exert ourselves and suffer bad things through the whole of life for the sake of playing [...] But to play so that one may be serious (*spoudazêi*), as Anacharis has it, seems to be correct. For play resembles relaxation, and because people are incapable of laboring (*ponein*) continuously, they need relaxation. Relaxation, then, is not an end: it arises for the sake of activity (*energeia*). The happy life also seems to accord with virtue, and this is the life that seems to be accompanied by seriousness but not to consist in play. We also say that serious things are better than those that prompt laughter and are accompanied by play, and that the activity of the better part or of better human beings is always the more serious one” (1176b 28-1177a 5).<sup>12</sup>

Aristotle attributes two features to play that draw his conception of it close to the *país paizôn*. He associates it with “laughter” (*geloiôn*: 1177a 4) and disassociates it from “labor” (*ponein*: 1176b 32) and “activity” (*energeia*: 1177a 1). By his lights, the best play can offer us is a brief respite from the hard work of a serious adult. It is only because we are embodied beings and thus “incapable of laboring continuously” that we need to relax, sleep and occasionally play.

In dismissing play, Aristotle identifies human excellence with seriousness. Indeed, this identification is so strong that throughout the *Nicomachean Ethics* the word *spoudaios* is a term of ethical praise. Joachim, for example, defines the *spoudaios* as “the morally healthy man.”<sup>13</sup> Irwin makes the same point. Aristotle, he says, “regularly uses [*spoudaios*] as the adjective corresponding to ‘virtue,’ and hence as equivalent to ‘good.’”<sup>14</sup> Sachs states that *spoudaios* “is the word that Aristotle reserves for people of the highest human excellence.”<sup>15</sup>

A key passage corroborating these assertions is found in Book III.4. Aristotle is discussing “wish” (*boulêsis*), which he says is concerned with ends. If I wish to be rich, then being rich is my goal. He then raises a question. Do people wish for “the good” or for “the apparent good?” If the former, then those people who choose to do something bad – and choice (for Aristotle) is of a means conducive to attainment of an end – do not actually have “an object of wish” (1113a 18). This view leads to an uncomfortably Socratic position. If the latter, “it turns out that there is no object of wish by nature but only what seems to be good to each” (1113a 20-22). Since “different things appear to be good to different people” (1113a 24) this view leads to an unacceptable kind of relativism. As he does so often, Aristotle finds a middle path on which to navigate between these two extremes. His solution relies on the *spoudaios*. To him, and only to him, “the object of wish is in a true sense” (1113a 25). In other words, what appears good to the serious person, and so what he wishes for, really is good, while what appears

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<sup>12</sup> Citations from the *Nicomachean Ethics* are from the Engl. transl. by R. Bartlett and S. Collins, Chicago IL: University of Chicago Press, 2009.

<sup>13</sup> H.H. JOACHIM, *Aristotle: The Nicomachean Ethics*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970, p. 104.

<sup>14</sup> T. IRWIN, *Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics*, Indianapolis IN: Hackett, 1985, pp. 399-400.

<sup>15</sup> J. SACHS, *Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics*, Newburyport MA: Focus Press, 2002, p. 210.

to a lower human being may well be whatever happens to catch his fancy. As Aristotle puts it, “the serious person judges each case correctly, and in each case what is true appears to him” (1113a 30). The *spondaios*, then, is the ethical touchstone for whom the good and the apparent good coalesce. To echo the language of the Athenian Stranger in the *Laws*, he knows what should be taken seriously, and what should not. He gets things right.

It comes as no surprise, then, that in *Nicomachean Ethics* X.6 Aristotle says that “serious things are better than those that prompt laughter and are accompanied by play.” As mentioned above, by here associating play with laughter he seems implicitly to affiliate it with the child. In doing so, he seems to neglect the possibility of the athlete serving as a paradigm of play. For surely the basketball player trying to win a game is engaged in some sort of *energeia*, and she certainly seems to be quite serious when on the court. Furthermore – and this is the more surprising point – despite his overt disdain for play, he nonetheless positions play in a place of considerable esteem. For X.6 begins his final account of “happiness” (1176a 33), the ultimate goal of human striving. This account culminates in X.7-8, Aristotle’s famous encomium of “contemplation” (*theoria*), or the theoretical life, which he identifies as the best of all human possibilities. In other words, while his language in describing play in X.6 is derogatory, the architecture of the *Nicomachean Ethics* demands that it be taken seriously. It is, after all, the penultimate moment of the entire work.

The key reason why play assumes this prominent position is that it occurs during times of leisure. For a fundamental tenet of both Aristotelian ethics and politics is that “happiness is in leisure (*scholê*). For we endure the lack-of-leisure (*ascholoumetha*) in order that we may enjoy leisure” (1177b 4-5).<sup>16</sup> The Greek *ascholoumetha*, is formed by the verb *scholazēin*, “to be at leisure,” and the alpha-privative. This linguistic point suggests that “to be busy,” a common translation of *ascholazēin*, is actually a deprivation. It is the absence of leisure, which in turn is not only a genuinely positive condition but is central in Aristotle’s conception of a good life. The Greek thus reverses the order of priority that is far more familiar in contemporary culture. For most of us, leisure is an afterthought that follows the serious business of work or industry, and its best benefit is that it helps us to return to the office refreshed. The Greeks, by contrast, ratchet “being busy,” or what we would call “work,” down a notch.

Leisure is first and foremost free time during which, unconstrained by external demands, we can do just what we want. For healthy and prosperous people who do not need to worry about putting food on the table, such time is not idled away in sleep, sloth or wine. Instead, it is occupied by activities chosen for their own sake. And it is precisely this sort of activity that Aristotle identifies with the highest human good, namely *eudaimonia* or “happiness,” which he famously defines as “an activity (*energeia*) of the soul in accord with virtue” (1098a 17).

Happiness, understood as excellent activity, must, he argues, be such that it “is complete in itself” (1097a 29) and is “chosen for itself and never on account of something else” (1097a 35). In X.7, he identifies *theoria* as best fitting this description. It

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<sup>16</sup> That “war is for the sake of peace” (1333a 35), just as lack-of-leisure is for the sake of leisure, is a notion central to the *Politics*.

achieves the highest level of “self-sufficiency” (*autarkeia*: 1177b 28), a feature he also ascribes to happiness in I.7 (1097 a8).

The striking feature of play, then, is that it is isomorphic with Aristotle’s conception of virtuous activity, and thus with *theoria*. For it is enjoyed only for the sake of itself and has its own kind of self-sufficiency. For within the confines of the play-world business and serious concerns are forgotten. Even though he denigrates play, he understands that, because of its affinity with theoretical activity, he must not only address it, he must position it as the penultimate topic of the entire *Nicomachean Ethics*.

A similar dynamic can be found in Book VIII of the *Politics*. Here Aristotle is discussing *paideia* (1137a 7), “education,” a word closely related to *paidia*, “play.”<sup>17</sup> Having argued that there is no greater task for political rulers than developing an educational program for young citizens, he discusses four subjects typically found in such a curriculum: letters, drawing, gymnastic and music. The first two are “useful for life” (1337b 25), but gymnastic, or what we might call sport, is pedagogically ambiguous. If it inculcates “an athletic (*athletikon*) disposition” (1338b 12), it runs the risk of damaging young bodies. For the “exertion of the body” can impede the development of “the mind” (1339a 10). Properly moderated, however, gymnastic can “contribute to courage” (1337b 25). Music too is somewhat ambiguous in Aristotle’s pedagogical scheme, and it is in the context of discussing it that Aristotle again grapples with play.

“At present most people share in [music] for the sake of pleasure; but those who arranged to have it in education at the beginning did so because nature itself seeks, as has been said repeatedly, not only to be occupied in correct fashion, but also to be capable of being at leisure in noble fashion [...] both are required, but being at leisure is more choiceworthy than occupation and an end, and what must be sought is the activity they [citizens] should have in leisure. Surely it is not play; for play would then necessarily be the end of life for us” (1337b 31-36).

As in *Nicomachean Ethics* X.6, here Aristotle rejects the possibility – one that Plato’s Athenian Stranger explicitly affirms – that play could be the *telos* of human life. Instead, he insists that its value is merely instrumental. “Play is for the sake of rest” (*Politics* 1337b 38), and the only benefit of rest is that it lets us get back to work. For this reason, Aristotle associates play with “sleep and drinking” (1339a 17), things we do merely to relax, and which should not be taken seriously. Nonetheless, as in *Nicomachean Ethics* X.6, in the *Politics* Aristotle understands that play must be addressed seriously precisely because it, like the best human activity (*theoria*), takes place in leisure. For this reason, he acknowledges that it is easy to overestimate the value of play.

“But it has happened to human beings that they make play an end. For the end too involves a certain pleasure – though not any chance pleasure; and while seeking the former they take the latter for it, on account of [play] having a certain similarity to the end of actions. For the end is choiceworthy not for the sake of anything that will be, and pleasures of [play] are not for the sake of anything that will be [...]” (1139b 31-41).

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<sup>17</sup> All citations from Aristotle’s *Politics* comes from the Engl. transl. by C. Lord, Chicago IL: University of Chicago Press, 1985.

To simplify the rather convoluted prose here: it is not surprising that some people would count play as the end, the *telos*, of human life. For the real end of human life, namely excellent activity or happiness, “involves a certain pleasure” and is “choiceworthy” for the sake of itself. Both features belong to play. Nonetheless, it would be a mistake of the highest order to think play is the *telos*. That description belongs to serious work alone. Therefore, Aristotle concludes, “the young should not be educated for the sake of play.” For the main task of education is to help the students learn, and “they do not play when they are learning, as learning is accompanied by pain” (1139a 28). It is in hard work that human beings are at their best.

As was the case with the Nietzschean elevation of the *país paizôn* to paradigmatic status, and with Plato’s affirmation of the competitive athlete, a worldview lies behind Aristotle’s dismissal of play. To sketch it with laughable brevity: unlike Plato, who thinks that the *telos* of philosophy – namely, a rational account of the Ideas construed as ontologically independent – is irremediably elusive, and who thus has Socrates describe himself in the *Republic* as “just playing,” Aristotle is confident that human *logos* can articulate the world as it is in itself; that it can, in other words, attain the truth. As he puts in the *Metaphysics*,

“The investigation (*theoria*) of truth is in one sense difficult, in another easy. A sign of this is the fact that neither can one attain it adequately, nor do all fail, but each says something about the nature of things; and while each of us contributes nothing or little to the truth, a considerable amount of it results from all our contributions” (993b1-4).

Attaining the truth is no easy job, but it is one that is entirely realistic. It requires cooperative effort from a great many people; a research team, one might say. It requires work. While theoretical activity is indeed the most self-sufficient of all possible lives – depending as it does on very little from the body or the larger community – it is facilitated, Aristotle suggests, by having “co-workers” (*sunergous*: *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1177a 34). For everyone has at least some access to some truth. As he puts it, “human beings hit upon the truth more often than not” (*Rhetoric* 1355a 7-10). Given the fact that (as he sees it) “all human beings by nature desire to understand” (*Metaphysics* 980a 20), it would be a shocking and thoroughly non-Aristotelian discovery – but possibly a Platonic one – were human beings to fail in what their nature impels them to pursue; were they to deceive themselves.

One final way to make this point. Both Plato and Aristotle would agree that the philosophical impulse to understand and articulate, to understand, the permanent structures of intelligible reality, whether they be the Ideas or nature, is tantamount to the desire to become like a god. In Diotima’s language, it reflects the desire to become immortal and, at least if Part II above has any merit, for Plato this is a problematic enterprise indeed. As the Athenian Stranger says, only god is by nature worthy of seriousness, while the affairs of human beings, including philosophy, are not worthy of great seriousness. By contrast, for Aristotle philosophy is unmistakably serious, and seriously rewarding. As he says in the *Nicomachean Ethics*,

“But one ought not – as some recommend – to think only about human things because one is a human being, nor only about mortal things because one is mortal, but rather to make oneself immortal,

insofar as that is possible, and to do all that bears on living in accord with what is the most excellent of the things in oneself” (1177b 31-34).

In short, Aristotle is the great “theoretical optimist” that Nietzsche describes in the *Birth of Tragedy* (and which he ascribes, mistakenly I think, to Socrates)<sup>18</sup>. He devoted his entire adult life to his rigorous study of animals, stars, constitutions, the material elements, poems, soul and being itself. One can thus hardly imagine him approaching death with the casual, almost jovial, indifference of Socrates in the *Phaedo*. Aristotle must have hated to die, for that meant he could not get back to work the next day.

Not surprisingly, Aristotle attempts to ground his theoretical optimism theoretically. Unlike Plato’s description of the erotic ascent in the *Symposium*, or of the Idea of the Good in the *Republic*, or of recollection in the *Meno* and *Phaedo* – descriptions that are fraught with dramatic complications and conceptual precariousness – Aristotle offers a methodical account of knowledge acquisition that begins in sense perception, which give us initial contact with reality, and builds upward from there. What this account is, and whether it is ultimately successful, is a story far too long even to broach in this paper. Suffice it to say here that Aristotle believes that there are good reasons to take the project of theorizing with maximum, indeed relentless, seriousness. And so it is that he denigrates play in both of its paradigmatic manifestations.

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<sup>18</sup> See F. NIETZSCHE, *The Birth of Tragedy*, Engl. transl. by W. Kaufman, New York NY: Vintage, 1967, p. 97.