Plato and Play
Taking Education Seriously in Ancient Greece

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In this article, the author outlines Plato's notions of play in ancient Greek culture and shows how the philosopher's views on play can be best appreciated against the background of shifting meanings and evaluations of play in classical Greece. Play—in various forms such as word play, ritual, and music—proved central to the development of Hellenic culture. In ancient Greece, play (*paidia*) was intrinsically associated with children (*paides*). However, both children and play assumed a greater cultural significance as literacy—and, consequently, education (*paideia*)—developed during the classical age of 500–300 BCE. Uniquely among ancient thinkers, Plato recognized that play influenced the way children developed as adults, and he proposed to regulate play for social ends. But Plato's attitude toward play was ambivalent. Inclined to consider play an unworthy activity for adults, he seemed to suggest that intellectual play in some form, as demonstrated in the dialectical banter of Socrates, could provide a stimulus to understanding. **Key words:** education in ancient Greece; play and child development; play and education; play and Plato; Socratic dialectic

Among various plausible misquotations that surface from time to time is a piece of popular wisdom attributed to Plato to the effect that "you can discover more about a person in an hour of play than in a year of conversation." It was quoted by Alaska Governor Sarah Palin in 2009, who took it from a popular American cookbook; the ultimate source may be a seventeenth-century treatise on etiquette by one Richard Lindgard (who does not attribute the quote to Plato). While the great philosopher's ideas on play were by his own reckoning groundbreaking for his time, his writings offer no indication that he would have entertained this particular notion. His reflections on play stem from his novel insight that play can influence the way children develop as adults; where adults themselves were concerned, Plato was inclined to view play, at least in some of its forms, as irrational and morally questionable. (St. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 13:11, "When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me." Plato

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would have approved.) At the same time, however, aspects of Plato's writings demonstrate that he recognized intellectual play in some form might provide a stimulus to understanding. In this article, I outline contexts and notions of play in ancient Greek culture to show how Plato's formulation of his original views on play may be better appreciated against the background of shifting meanings and evaluations of play in the society of his own time and earlier.

Play in Ancient Greece

In archaic Greece (roughly 800–500 BCE), aspects of play appear intrinsic to a wide range of cultural activities. The playing of games and music served as a central element in religious ceremonies and social events. In elite gatherings such as drinking parties (*symposia*), activities included singing and playing the lyre, competing to compose impromptu verses, and participating in word games and riddles. For such purposes, revered musician-poets like Homer, sages like Pythagoras, and philosophers like Heraclitus seemed to offer their wisdom as a form of intellectual play. Even ancient warfare can be viewed—and was so presented by historians in antiquity—as an activity conducted as a form of rule-bound, quasi-ritualistic play. The childhood of young aristocrats, the class to which our sources almost exclusively attest, involved training for political and military leadership in such activities as gymnastic competitions and verbal contests. The songs of Homer, the earliest surviving Greek literary texts in the Western canon, depict a wide range of athletic and sporting play, as well as music, dancing, and singing. In the *Iliad* (Book 9) Achilles's tutor Phoenix tells of being charged to instruct the boy to be "both a doer of actions and a speaker of words"; the hero is also depicted as singing to the lyre. The Funeral Games for Patroclus (Book 24 of the *Iliad*) provides relief from battle and death, and the dancing and musical play with which the Phaeacians entertain Odysseus in the *Odyssey* (Book 8) offer a pleasant contrast to the mortal dangers he faces on his journey.

Homer describes the latter activities as *paizein*, playing, a verb etymologically connected to the Greek *pais*, child (significantly, *paizein* is not found in the *Iliad* with its overtly martial themes, but only in the more domestically oriented *Odyssey*). The word is also found on one of the very earliest substantial verse inscriptions in Greek lettering, a single hexameter verse found on an elegant earthenware wine jug (the Dipylon vase) dating to Homer's time, the eighth

century BCE. The damaged jug seems to have been the object designated at a *symposion* as the reward for the best performer in a dancing competition, and the surviving part of the verse inscription runs "Whosoever of the dancers now sports (*paizei*) most energetically. . . ." A missing verse may have added something like "let him take this as the prize for his skill." The imagined scenario of competitive challenge between young men engaged in dancing recalls the scene in the *Odyssey* (Book 8, lines 262–65) in which the "twinkling feet" of young dancers in the court of the Phaeacians arouse Odysseus's admiration and wonder. The inscription offers a nice illustration of the way the beginnings of literary culture intertwine with the playful and competitive ethos of the aristocratic symposium.

The relationship of the word *paizein*, play, to *pais*, child, may suggest that for Greeks "play" referred intrinsically to activities relating to children rather than to adults. However, the term naturally extends to activities we might not view as laborious, serious, or solemn. Ancient Greek texts mainly construe "play" as the opposite of "work," or exertion, which in the mainly agrarian context of Greek life had connotations of agricultural labor. More generally, play related to a range of pursuits involving *paignia*, toys or trifles, in both a literal and a figurative sense. But, just as we say that we "play" music and sports, the Greeks naturally referred to these activities as *paizein*. The Greeks did not particularly associate these forms of play with children, nor did they think of them as trifling. Whether music accompanied religious ritual or glorified athletics in the Olympic games, Greek society took it no less seriously than does ours. Thus, in the classical period (fifth and fourth centuries BCE), the referents of "play" embrace ubiquitous expressions of music and dance, competitions both sporting or artistic, and the lively pursuit of abstruse forms of knowledge associated with the Sophists (professional teachers). We should not, therefore, be misled by etymology into thinking that ancient Greeks constructed all play as merely child's play.

The connection between play and childhood comes into greater focus, however, when we recognize that the pursuit of higher forms of play, in particular perhaps literary play, ideally requires an education that begins in childhood. The Greeks considered scholarly study to fall into the category neither of play nor of work but of the productive use of leisure, *scholē*—the word from which we derive our "school," "scholar" and so on. However, no evidence exists of schools before the early fifth century BCE, and the word's connotations of formal education and intellectual discipline do not arise until the beginning of the Hellenistic

period in the late fourth century BCE. Instead, we find that in classical Greece the general expression for intellectual nurture and accomplishment, whether for children and adults, centers around another notion also etymologically connected to *pais* (child)—the notion of *paideia.*

Play in the Development of Greek Culture

We do not find the Greek word *paideia* (which translates variously as "education," "training," "culture") in texts prior to the early fifth century BCE. And before this century, little hard evidence appears for the existence of a formal educational process. The bard Phemius depicted inthe *Odyssey*, whom we may accept as broadly representative of epic oral singers of the period 1000–700 BCE, claims that he is "divinely inspired and self-taught" (Book 22, lines 347–48). However, a climate of growing literary and technical expertise characterizes the so-called "orientalizing" period (800–600 BCE), when formal learning and apprenticeship in the arts borrowed from the Greeks' Near Eastern neighbors enabled young Hellenes to attain mastery in new fields of thought and technical skill (*technē*).[1] The benefits of education offered a practical substitute for the gift of divine inspiration. Learning developed in conjunction with alphabetic literacy, the interchange of goods and ideas, and the growth of visual and poetic arts.

In his *Homo Ludens* of 1938, Johan Huizinga proposed that all forms of culture are ultimately predicated on forms of play. It is impossible to divorce the products of high culture entirely from play, and in the case of ancient Greek art and literature, the connections are insistent and inescapable. The centrality of forms of play in Greek culture has seemed to offer a clue to its enduring intellectual and artistic accomplishments.[2] The preservation of signal accomplishments also required attention to methods of cultural transmission: the crucial adoption from and adaptation of the Phoenicians' *alif bet* to the Greeks' *alpha beta* is generally dated to around the eighth century BCE, and some have suggested that it was spurred by a desire to record Homer's songs.[3] In due course, instruction in the recently devised Greek alphabet became the foundation of Greek intellectual culture. With the advent of alphabetic literacy, teaching for at least some children needed to be more rigorous and systematic. While musical and athletic accomplishments, as well as skills in verbal and rhetorical improvisation, remained key virtues for educated adult males in the city-states that flowered in archaic Greece, the growing importance of writing had impelled

the teaching of letters. There would have been a demand and requirement by both elites and other classes to acquire the newly available technology. By the fifth century BCE, as practitioners of music, medicine, astronomy, geometry, architecture, and even sculpture became increasingly well-informed and inclined to express their ideas and knowledge in written form, a host of new educational aspirations could be satisfied via literate education.[4]

Literary and technical education also helped fill the gap between the elites who assimilated their culture in traditional ways (e.g. through association with older mentors and participation in civic rituals) and nonelites who made contributions to their society's cultural resources through individual effort and learned skills. For educated citizens, sporting, musical, and dramatic competitions provided rule-bound social activities of the kind that have been characterized by anthropologists as "deep" play.[5] The notion of deep play requires an extension of the idea of mere child's play, suggesting that no simple contrast can be drawn between what we consider play and what we consider serious. We talk about playing not only games and music, but also about playing a part on stage or a role in society or government. For most ancient Greeks, political engagement and military participation represented the epitome of serious activity.

The development of Greek literary and musical culture likely inclined those citizens and families with a degree of leisure to place greater emphasis on education from an early age. They could still think of liberal pursuits at a higher level as play because they continued to associate work with manual and agrarian pursuits. This attitude prevails even in democratic fifth-century Athens, from which comes the overwhelming majority of evidence for intellectual activity. The audience for the Sophists who converged on imperial Athens consisted of upper-class young men seeking ways to enhance their debating skills and political prospects; and sophistic instruction was regularly presented as a form of intellectual play. As a result, the "sophisticated" word manipulation that we find in Athenian drama and rhetoric of the fifth century also becomes associated with play. The association has an evident psychological resonance. In an essay pubished in 1907 ("Creative Writers and Day Dreaming"), Sigmund Freud noted that the creative writer "is the same as the child at play. He creates a world of fantasy which he takes very seriously—that is, which he invests with large amounts of emotion—while separating it sharply from reality."[6] The theater of Athens became the site of, among other brilliant literary expressions, the comedy of Aristophanes, which represent the most scintillating instances of play with words, scenes, and characters produced in antiquity.

Children's Play and Adult Play

The idea that children's pleasure or fun might be a valuable adjunct to education does not appear evident in ancient Greek sources. Much children's play seems conservative and repetitive; the rules and roles that children adopt and experiment with in play also provide templates for relating with peers, both cooperatively and competitively. But improvisational play and spontaneous experimentation, operating with pliable rules and during which learning and self-discovery takes place, present a paradigm for creative activity. The sense of discovery for children possible in play—like the piece that fits the jigsaw which you suddenly find just when you need it—resembles the Greek concept of *kairos*, "the opportune moment." Creative achievement generally requires both learned skills and the happy play of chance. In the words of the Athenian playwright Agathon, "Chance and skill (*technē*) go hand in hand." The Greek notion of technical skill embraced systematic rules, imparted by instruction and allowing both for the preservation of traditional knowledge and the prospect of experimental innovation.

In his classic study *A History of Education in Antiquity* (1948), Henri Marrou wrote of education in the Hellenistic period.

> The whole aim of this education was the formation of adults, and not the development of the child. There is no point in being led astray by etymology. I know quite well that *paideia* contains the word *pais*. But this needs to be translated as "the treatment to which a child should be subjected" – i.e. to turn him into a man. The Latins happily translated *paideia* as *humanitas* ["humane studies," derived from Latin *homo*, man]. Hence the utter absence of and lack of interest in child psychology, the absence of anything approximating to our infant schools, the abstract analytical character of the exercises, the barbaric severity of the discipline. . . . The only point of education is to teach the child to transcend himself.[7]

The idea that education, like everything else, has its final manifestation in the civilized adult resonates with the notion (associated with the philosopher Aristotle above all) that organisms and institutions develop towards their natural fulfillment: the purpose of an acorn is to develop into an oak tree. Aristotle and his teacher Plato were the first theorists of education whose ideas on the subject

survive to any substantial degree. Both philosophers were conscious of a moral ambiguity in the concept of play: on the one hand, play seems to imbue the norms of serious cultural activity; on the other, it suggests something intrinsically unserious and childlike.

Music or *mousikē*—for the Greeks, a term that embraced poetry, literature, and drama as well as music and dancing, all of which fell under the aegis of the Muses—proved a prime instance of this duality. If it was a form of play, it was one with deep ethical implications. In the *Republic* (Book 4) Plato evinces a concern with musical experimentation that violates traditional musical "laws": "Lawlessness of this kind can easily go unnoticed . . . because it's seen as a kind of play that does no harm. [But] it sinks bit by bit into peoples' actions and character; it then looms up and infects their business dealings, and goes on to treat legal and social norms with wanton disregard, until it finally creates total havoc in both the private and public sphere." [This and all subsequent translations from the Greek are mine.]

The musical laws to which Plato alludes may have included, among other things, the convention that texts were set to music following the "natural" sound of the words. An ideal state, Plato concludes, must control *mousikē* so extensively that drama would actually be abolished. But in his last dialogue, *Laws*, Plato makes his speaker note the dual aspect of "the Muse" as patron goddess of both *paidia* (play) and *paideia* (education). He suggests (Book 7) that music and literature should at least be regulated: "In a city where the laws relating to the educational and playful aspects of the Muse are properly set down for the present and future, surely dramatists should not have a free hand in choruses to put any kind of rhythms, tunes, and words in front of the children of law-abiding citizens without considering their moral effect."

Plato signals that what follows is a proposal of marked originality.

> No society has ever really noticed how important play is for social stability. My proposal is that one should regulate children's play. Let them always play the same games, with the same rules and under the same conditions, and have fun playing with the same toys. That way you'll find that adult behavior and society itself will be stable.
> As it is, games are always being changed and modified and new ones invented, so that youngsters never want the same thing two days running. They've no fixed standard of good or bad behavior, or of dress. They fasten on to anyone who comes up with some novelty or pro-

> duces something with different shapes, colors, or whatever. This poses a threat to social stability, because people who promote this kind of innovation for children are insidiously changing the character of the young by making them reject the old and value the new. To promote such expressions and attitudes is a potential disaster for society. . . . People suppose that chopping and changing children's play is just "playing," with no real or serious consequences. So instead of preventing children doing this, they give them their blessing. They don't realize that if children introduce novelties into their games, they'll end up as adults who are quite different from the previous generation, looking for a different way of life—which means new laws and new social institutions and, as I said earlier, disastrous consequences for society as a whole.

Plato's suggestion for preventing social disorder by regulating the nature of children's play is, according to the sociologist Alvin Gouldner in *Enter Plato* (1965), the earliest recorded instance of such a connection being made.[8] Plato's point of departure in *Laws* (Book 1) occurs when he observes that it is natural for children to play: "When children are brought together, they discover more or less spontaneously the games which come naturally to them at that age." Hence he does not propose banning play altogether, but harnessing it to utilitarian purpose: "For example, if a boy is to be a good farmer or a good builder, he should play at building toy houses or at farming and be provided by his tutor with miniature tools modeled on real ones. . . . One should see games as a means of directing children's tastes and inclinations to the role they will fulfill as adults."

Plato's recognition that children's play might be educational was indeed radical for his time. But the idea of play concerned him less as a teacher than as a political theorist. In the inventive and commercial climate of late fifth-century and early fourth-century Athens, he may well have encountered children he considered overindulged with unusual toys, excessive games, and fancy clothes. Curiously enough, we know of the creation of a remarkable plaything by a close friend of Plato's, the inventor and philosopher Archytas of Tarentum. Aulus Gellius's *Attic Nights* (Book 10) records him as having constructed a toy pigeon that, powered by steam, actually flew. (Unfortunately it crashed on its maiden flight, and the experiment does not appear to have been repeated.) Perhaps educational provision for children was being taken more seriously by Plato's time because children themselves had become more visible. Greek art in the

late fifth century suggests a shift in attitudes toward children. The careful way Plato's contemporaries depicted children on vases and reliefs makes them seem more a focus of artistic interest in their own right than they do in the images of children produced by earlier Greeks.

The real target of Plato's concern, however, was neither children nor toy makers, but the society of his time. Politics in Athens during and following the Peloponnesian War (fought between 431 and 404 BCE) were beset by infighting between political groupings led by upper-class young men, demonstrating the changeability and inconsistency of an imperfectly functioning radical democracy.[9] It was Plato's genuine contribution to ask what had led to such a fluid and dangerous political landscape and to conclude that children habituated to change in their early lives might grow into restless and dissatisfied adults.

Play and Educational Leisure (*Scholē*)

In a famous passage of his *Politics* (Book 8), Aristotle notes the historical connection between leisure and the growth of learning: "As wealth provided more leisure, the Greeks became more open-minded about areas in which they might seek competence. They had already been so in the prewar period, but because they were riding high after their victories in the Persian Wars they got into all kinds of new disciplines. Nothing was too recherché: they continually sought out new areas of study and consequently brought even aulos [Greek reed instrument–ed.] playing into the curriculum."

Despite the connections implied here between learning and musical play, Aristotle thought of education as completely separate from play, arguing that education is a way to spend leisure-time edifyingly, whereas play is nothing more than a break from work: "We should ask what activity real leisure (*scholē*) consists of. It's certainly not playing. That would mean play was the be-all and end-all of life, which is out of the question. The fact is that play relates to work more than to leisure: the worker needs a break, and play is about taking a break from work, while leisure is the antithesis of work and exertion."

Aristotle's reduction of work and play to a dichotomy may account for why the new understanding of play as educational for children, broached by Plato's novel theorizing, disappeared from ancient thinking. It was not to be revived for over two millennia.

In the late sixth century (the prewar period to which Aristotle refers in

the first passage above, before the Persian Wars of 490–479 BCE), the Athenian tyrants of the Peisistratid dynasty had invited famous poets and musicians to Athens. These included the choir trainer Lasos of Hermione, who established competitions for ritual dance-songs (dithyrambs) in which for the first time large contingents of boys as well as men were trained to participate. One of the effects of pursuing such skills at higher levels was a desire to systematize the training of youth at earlier stages. This ultimately required a recognized teaching profession, with elementary schools, instruction manuals, prizes for achievement and so on—things for which slim evidence exists before the fifth century. (The fourth-century orator Aeschines refers to the laws of Solon, the sixth-century Athenian lawmaker, aimed at protecting schoolboys from sexual abuse by teachers, but the historicity of the reference is hard to confirm.) Images on vases, however, show schoolrooms and poetic texts in use. The Douris cup, for example, painted in Athens in the 470s, shows a boy with stylus poised as he inscribes letters on a wax-covered folding wooden tablet. Sadly, the first mention of a school in a Greek text is in the context of disaster. We learn from the historian Herodotus (Book 6.27) that, at Chios in 494 BCE, the roof collapsed on a hundred children who were being taught letters, killing all but one of them.

In the fifth century BCE, most of the principal representatives of Hellenic *paideia* converged on Athens, a vibrant urban center described by the Sophist Hippias of Elis as "the headquarters of Greek brilliance." In the Funeral Speech of 431 BCE as recorded by the historian Thucydides (Book 1), Athenian statesman Pericles similarly summed up the city as "an education (*paideusis*) to Greece." The choice of words seems to underscore the elevated status accorded to education by Athenians, a feature for which their city was especially noted in the eyes of the Greeks and to which it could lay particular claim in the Hellenic world. It is likely that the need for a new kind of political education was driving Greeks—and particularly Athenians, with their radically democratic constitution—to reassess their notion of play and its place in their culture. The politics at the center of the Greek world depended more than ever before on the use of words, spoken and written. Where the aristocratic ethos had been fundamentally playful, in the Greek world after the Persian Wars, the ideal of an "education for play" became increasingly marginalized. The Athenian statesman Themistocles, who according to the fifth-century writer Ion of Chios was pilloried as uncultured, wished more keenly to establish Athens as a naval power by building its great fleet than to impress his peers in musical contests at drinking parties.

The Sophists in particular transferred the idea of serious play wholesale

from the arena of athletics, *symposia*, and war games exclusively to that of verbal skill. They were masters of play: play on words, on moral values, on distinctions between illusion and reality. While they crystallized the idea that *paideia* was the desirable end product of Greek culture, they also introduced the notion, deeply deplored by Plato, that skill in word manipulation was the principal route to success in society and politics. Sophistic approaches to education provide a contrast to the conservative program of education outlined in Plato's dialogue *Protagoras*, where from around the age of six to the age of fifteen youths learned to read, recite Homer and other classics, sing and play the lyre, and practice gymnastics, with the aim of becoming well-rounded "gentlemen." Sophistic doctrines seemed, by contrast, innovative and subversive. They supposedly undermined conventional religious and philosophical notions and promoted moral, intellectual, and political opportunism. The Sophist Protagoras of Abdera, for instance, taught that "man is the measure of all things," a doctrine that could support an atheistic and dangerous relativism. The fact that some Sophists claimed to teach an "art of politics" to young men also challenged the traditional view that politics was the domain of age, wisdom, and experience. The influence of aristocratic youths in the political affairs of Athens was blamed for disastrous events such as the defeat of the city's Sicilian Expedition in 413, its bloody antidemocratic coup in 411, and its fall to the Spartans and their allies in 404 BCE.

Playing and Fighting

In Pericles's Funeral Speech mentioned in the previous section, the Athenian claimed that the honorable amateurism of Athens in military matters sharply contrasted with the efforts of their Spartan adversaries: "Whereas they from early youth are always undergoing exercises aimed at making them brave, we live in a leisurely manner . . . we prefer to meet danger with a light heart and without laborious training."

The rhetoric conveniently overlooks the fact that Athens's position at the head of a naval empire depended on a laborious program of naval training inaugurated by Themistocles fifty years earlier. Clearly, Pericles exhibits a kind of aristocratic disdain for the lack of playfulness in the systematic military training so notable (and so successful) of the Spartans. Pericles alleges that the truly free citizen lives a life of disinterested leisure pursuits, taking war and politics in his stride, and excelling effortlessly when required to do so. Pericles presents

paideia (education) as a form of *paidia* (play).

A century later, Aristotle in his *Politics* (Book 8) expressed a much more pragmatic view on this very subject, observing that the Spartan focus on training had been the essential ingredient of their success: "So long as the Spartans applied themselves to strenuous discipline, they were ahead of the competition. Now we see them losing out to others both in gymnastic events and in battle. The reason they used to be superior was not the way they trained their young men, but simply the fact that they trained them and others did not."

In fifth-century Athens, the instruction provided by the Sophists aimed largely at teaching young men how to succeed in the political fray, suggesting that individuals could aspire to learn the "rules of the game" and apply them. However, what the rhetoricians actually provided was more a training in techniques than substantial knowledge or moral precepts. The Athenian Sophists Euthydemus and Dionysodorus applied their skills to military strategy, explicitly calling their approach (as reported by Plato in his dialogue *Laches*) "playful." Even warfare could apparently be reduced to a game of skill with rules of winners and losers. The comic playwright Aristophanes in his play *Frogs* mocked—using an overtly military metaphor—the Athenians' penchant for argumentation (lines 1113–16): "They're veterans, and each one of them, book in hand, learns verbal cut-and-thrust; their natural mettle is already of the toughest material, but now it's been honed to a fine point."

To Socrates and Plato, the functional attitude of the Sophists toward instruction seemed immorally reductive of the idea of inculcating in young men genuine social and political virtues. For the two of them, the process of dialectic favored by Socrates was not a game, let alone a device for enhancing a political career, but a way of teasing out the truth of profoundly important questions like "What is justice?" and "What is the best life for a human being?" Superficially, however, Socratic dialectic seemed to differ little from Sophistic argumentation and to appear just as playful. In Plato's *Republic* (Book 6), Socrates's interlocutor Adimantus sourly compares dialectic to a board game that results in a stalemate and leaves participants none the wiser: "Your hearers think that owing to their inexperience of the game of question-and-answer, they are with every question led a bit astray by the argument. When these bits are accumulated at the conclusion of the discussion mighty is their fall and the apparent contradiction of what they first said. Just as amateur players of draughts are finally hemmed in by expert players and cannot move their pieces, so interlocutors are finally blocked and have their mouths stopped by this other game of draughts, played

not with counters but with words. But the truth is not affected by that outcome."

The ludic presentation of such activities as war and politics may have led to the need for a clearer articulation of the distinction between types of activity one might consider playful and those one should not. Xenophon, the soldier and historian of the early fourth century BCE, makes this distinction at the very beginning of his *Symposium*, where he writes "I believe that it is not only the serious actions of distinguished men which are of interest, but also those done in play."

Playing with Words

The word play and verbal banter evident in the Socratic dialectic recorded by Plato followed a long-standing tradition of Greek cultural interchange. In Homer's *Odyssey* (Book 9, line 408), the hero describes how he tricked the Cyclops by giving his name as "Nobody" so that the monster insists "*Nobody* blinded me!" As we have seen, in more than one social and semieducational setting in the ancient world, formal and informal kinds of word play proved central. The previously mentioned musician Lasos of Hermione made a name for himself in the late sixth century BCE with his word games, giving rise to a Greek word for "puns" *lasismata*. An example of the kind of riddle for which Lasos became known is "How can a fish be cooked and uncooked at the same time?" Answer: "If it is *optos*" – a pun on *optos*, which means both "visible" (from the root *opt-*, see) and "cooked" (from *optao*, cook).

In the late fifth century BCE, the Sophist Gorgias designated his rhetorical showpiece "playthings" (*paignia*). Plato may have had this in mind when in *Phaedrus* he makes Socrates dismiss *all* writing as unserious: "In the written word there is necessarily much that is playful, and no written discourse, whether in verse or prose, deserves to be treated very seriously." The written word might preserve thought, but it could also constrain it and misrepresent the truth. It could teach immorality as easily as morality. Aristophanes in his comedies often associated young men with sophistry, and he presented their obsession with speaking and argumentation as play rather than work. Unlike the sturdy farmers of rural Attica, whom he described in a fragment of a lost play as "a hard-working tribe," Aristophanes called the Sophists and their young urban followers "idlers" (literally nonworkers) who indulge in an ironic kind of manufacture of "fancy words and verbal games, all fresh from the bellows and the modeling frames."

Aristophanes' comedy *Clouds*, produced in 423 BCE, mounts an exuberant attack on the malign influence of Sophists of whom Socrates is unfairly shown as the paradigm. An old man Strepsiades, beset by debts incurred by his spendthrift son Pheidippides, decides to go to the "school of Socrates" to learn how to *argue* his way out of debt. In the surviving text of the play (a version revised a few years later), the new style of education trumps the old, but neither has the last word. In the end, Strepsiades simply attacks and sets fire to the school run by Socrates. Aristophanes implicitly presents a third, playful, alternative: comedy itself as a form of instruction. The audience must decide if it is reasonable to respond to Sophistry, as Strepsiades eventually does, with real violence. The comedy reminds us that although intellectualism can seem merely a form of play, the backlash against using play for serious ends, and encouraging one's sons to do so, can be violent and dangerous.

As the linguist David Crystal aims to show in his book *Language Play* (1998), play is as crucial a function of language as is communication—and as central to our lives.[10] Playfulness with words seems to go beyond mere fun and to beget something more than "mere" play. Both Sophistic verbal manipulation and Aristophanic instruction highlight the paradox that the new seriousness about late fifth-century Athenian politics was connected to a new playfulness about words—and specifically about the written word. The notion that words are the tools of thought and can alter or even somehow constitute reality opens up all sorts of vistas for play, from the etymological fantasies of Plato's *Cratylus* to the modern poststructuralist theory, foreshadowed by sophistic relativism, that the world that is socially constructed through discourse. Word play is also a serious business for learning. It sets up new connections between words and thoughts and is therefore a spur to imagination and creativity. Because it is fun, it can be an effective way of acquiring knowledge, and children often experience a fascination with manipulating words.

Plato eventually established his school, the Academy, to offer a rigorous intellectual training to young men. A rival school founded by the orator Isocrates aimed to produce candidates for the political stage. By abstracting education to the intellectual plane, Plato's school has given rise to the idea of impractical "academicism," suggesting a debate regarding the aims and outcomes of higher education that continues today. It would not have been lost on Plato that purely academic pursuits have a closer affinity to "play," and may thereby be ultimately more valuable, than more instrumentally directed teaching. Without the benefit of modern psychological insights, however, play remained suspect for Plato

because it was fundamentally irrational. Its rules and rituals, its objects and conventions appeared to have little purpose other than to distract and amuse children. His attempt to resolve the tension led to his original proposal for harnessing children's play to mold youngsters into stable, rational citizens. But both the fact that his dialogues also show a constant awareness of Socrates's playfulness with irony and verbal banter and his own assertion that philosophy is the "truest music" (*mousikē*) carry the clear implication that both *paidia* (play) and *paideia* (education) have a place in the pursuit of wisdom.

Notes

1. Walter Burkert, *The Orientalizing Revolution: Near Eastern Influence on Greek Culture in the Early Archaic Age* (1995), 14–33.
2. Armand D'Angour, *The Greeks and the New: Novelty in Ancient Greek Imagination and Experience* (2011), 166–70.
3. Barry Powell, *Homer and the Origin of the Greek Alphabet* (1991), 110.
4. Rosalind Thomas, *Literacy and Orality in Ancient Greece* (1992).
5. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (1973), 412–53.
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