

## The Playful and the Serious: A Reading of Xenophon's *Symposium*

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Abstract: In this paper I investigate the relationship between the serious and the playful elements in Socrates' character as these unfold within the context of Xenophon's *Symposium*. For the Greeks, the concept of value is attached to the meaning of seriousness, and this accounts for the natural preference for the serious over the playful. Despite the potential rivalry of the playful and philosophy, Socrates mixes the playful with the serious in such a way as to conceal their boundary. This mixing serves the purpose of education, by both attracting us to Socrates and placing us at a distance from the intended meaning of his words.

For all that has been written about the life and death of Socrates, he remains an enigmatic character. This is not only because the most direct accounts we have are the writings of Plato, Xenophon, and Aristophanes—men whose primary concern was not the recording of history. Even if we take their testimony at face value, we often find ourselves perplexed about what Socrates is “up to.” On the one hand, he has a mission to the city of Athens, a mission he seems to take so seriously that he is willing to be executed rather than desist from it. If this were the only side of Socrates, we could label his life “tragic” without question. But there is another side to his character, displayed in the apparent levity with which Socrates often carries out his mission. We see this most readily in the playful character of many of his conversations and his mostly “casual” attitude toward events as they unfold. As if these two sides to his character were not enough, it is often difficult to decide “which side he is on” at any given moment. Is he being serious now or is he only kidding? Naturally this led Socrates' contemporaries to question his sincerity. In this paper I shall give a reading of Xenophon's *Symposium*, a text especially suited to bring out the relationship between these serious and playful elements in Socrates' life. As we

shall see, this relationship is important not only for making sense of Socrates' puzzling character, but for understanding the seriousness of his mission, and—more generally—what makes a good human life.

## I.

It is with the question of the playful and the serious that Xenophon begins his account of the *Symposium*: “But in my opinion, not only are the serious deeds of gentlemen worth recalling, but so too are their deeds done in times of play” (1.1).<sup>1</sup> The justification of this opinion is to be found in Xenophon's subsequent retelling of the banquet activities at which he himself was present (*παραγευόμενος*). Xenophon never says why this recollection is valuable; evidently its worth will become apparent during the course of the narrative. Nor does Xenophon reveal the identity of the gentlemen (*οἱ καλοὶ κάγαθοί*) on account of whom the event is worth recollecting.<sup>2</sup> Presumably Socrates is one such gentleman;<sup>3</sup> but concerning the status of the other guests at the dinner party—including the narrator himself—Xenophon remains silent. Nonetheless, with the opening lines Xenophon has introduced the thematic framework of the dialogue, a framework that appears to be focused rather narrowly on the relation of the playful to the serious, but on further inspection concerns the question of how one should live, as well as Socrates' purpose in living the way he did.

If the opening lines serve the essential function that I have indicated, we need to develop more rigorously the thought contained within them before proceeding with the dialogue proper. This thought is articulated in three central concepts: (1) seriousness (*σπουδή*) (2) playfulness (*παιδιά*), and (3) that which is worthy (*τὸ ἄξιον*). In the first line Xenophon seems to take it for granted that the serious deeds of gentlemen are worthy of recollection; only the recollection of

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<sup>1</sup> Xenophon, *The Shorter Socratic Writings*, ed. Robert C. Bartlett (Cornell University Press, 1996). All quotations in English will be from this edition, cited parenthetically by chapter and section number. The Greek, when cited, is drawn from *Xenophontis Opera Omnia: Volume II*, ed. E. C. Marchant (Oxford, 1901 and 1921).

<sup>2</sup> I follow Bartlett and others in rendering *οἱ καλοὶ κάγαθοί* idiomatically as “gentlemen.” The literal translation of this phrase is “the noble (beautiful) and the good.”

<sup>3</sup> Cf. “He rid many individuals of these [vices], after making them desire virtue and providing them hopes that if they attended to themselves they would be gentlemen [*καλοὺς κάγαθοὺς*]. And yet, he never promised at any time to be a teacher of this. But by visibly being so himself, he made those who spent time with him hope that by imitating him they would come to be of the same sort” (*Mem.* 1.2.2-3). Xenophon, *Memorabilia*, trans. Amy L. Bonnette (Cornell University Press, 1994). All quotations of the *Memorabilia* will be from this edition, cited parenthetically by book, chapter, and section number.

their playfulness requires explanation. Here we already see a natural preference for the serious over the playful; we must inquire in what follows into the source of this preference. It remains to be seen whether the playful has a value of its own or whether any value it may have is necessarily borrowed from the serious. Robert Bartlett observes that here Xenophon “aims at a certain elevation or rehabilitation of the playful.”<sup>4</sup> Perhaps. But at this stage it is not the playful to which Xenophon assigns value but rather the *recollection* of the playful—and only with respect to those who are noble and good. Although their playful activity is worth recollecting (ἀξιολογητέα), Xenophon does not yet say it is worth doing. But if we separate the playful from the recollection of the playful in this way, we can pose the question: what is the character of such a recollection? Is the recollection of the playful itself playful? Or is playfulness only worth recollecting if the recollection is itself serious—that is, done in the service of serious philosophical inquiry?

At this point it is too early to answer these questions: we pose them here only to guide our inquiry. But before this inquiry can proceed, we must address one final question. This concerns the nature of the serious itself. What does it mean to be serious? Although it is impossible to give a full account here, we should carefully distinguish two primary senses. (i) Seriousness is a *comportment* a human being can have towards something else. Seriousness is *about* something. One person is serious about school or about music; another lacks seriousness about a job or about painting. It is in this sense that Callias, the host of the banquet, refers to those “serious about obtaining public office” (σπουδαρχίαις) (1.4). (ii) But seriousness can also characterize certain *things* toward which one is comported. Socrates observes in the *Memorabilia* that those converse most nobly who “have the most understanding of the most serious things [σπουδαιότατα]” (3.3.11). The question of how to rule the city justly is serious—something worth taking seriously. The question of how to win a board game, on the other hand, is not so serious. Here our third essential concept, that of value or worth (τὸ ἄξιον), enters into the meaning of seriousness. That which is serious is worth taking seriously precisely because it is valuable; if I truly value something I will assume a serious attitude toward it. Consequently, the question of what is to be taken seriously necessarily involves the question of values and the good. And because it involves such a difficult question, many human beings will fail to treat

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<sup>4</sup> Robert C. Bartlett, “On the *Symposium*,” in Xenophon, *The Shorter Socratic Writings*, 174.

seriously what deserves seriousness, treating other things seriously instead. Not knowing what makes a good human life, they know not what the serious matters are.

We can now see why Xenophon takes it for granted that the serious deeds of gentlemen are worthy of recollection—at the same time that he acknowledges the need to justify the recollection of playful deeds. Gentlemen, those who are “noble and good,” only take seriously those things of the highest value. They do not waste their time on frivolous pursuits. One therefore can learn from accounts of their actions what the serious matters are, and by imitating these actions become more “noble and good.” Playfulness, on the other hand, does not have the same association with value that seriousness has. In fact, by standing in opposition to seriousness, playfulness is naturally associated with trivial concerns. Aristotle represents this view when he writes: “We speak of serious things as better than those that bring laughter and involve play, and say that the activity of the better part or of the better person is always the more serious.”<sup>5</sup> The value of playfulness—and, therefore, the recollection of playfulness—requires justification.

Accordingly, in order to justify the value of playfulness, one would need to deny either (a) the strict alliance of seriousness with value or (b) the absolute opposition between the playful and the serious. Indeed, perhaps the serious and the playful can be mixed, if one is able to assume a serious attitude toward the playful or employ the playful in pursuit of a serious goal. In any case, Xenophon promises to focus on playful and serious actions (*ἔργα*), and such actions require a choice to do that particular playful or serious thing. As Xenophon tells it, Socrates would have preferred not to attend the symposium at all. After the Panathenian games, Callias invites Socrates and his colleagues to a banquet, thinking that these are the kind of people who would make the party more splendid. As if to entice Socrates, Callias assures him that he is a person “worthy of great seriousness” (*πολλῆς σπουδῆς ἄξιον*) because he can say wise things (1.6). Socrates, it seems, is not opposed to such recreation in principle. After all, we can only assume that he is returning from watching a sporting event himself. And, since Socrates almost always is “at leisure,” we can assume that he has the discretionary time to devote to a victory feast. Nevertheless, his group initially declines Callias’ offer, only giving in when Callias becomes increasingly annoyed (1.7).

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<sup>5</sup> *E.N.* 10.6, 1177a3-5. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Joe Sachs (Newburyport, MA: Focus, 2002). All subsequent quotations from the *Ethics* will be from this translation.

This process of choosing to come to the symposium raises a philosophical issue essential for understanding the relationship of the playful and the serious. Play, as such, requires discretionary time: one can only play when one is not at work. This means that the leisured class in Athens has more time for play than the working class, since leisure (σχολή) is associated with freedom in a socio-economic context.<sup>6</sup> In requiring leisure the playful is similar to another activity in ancient society: philosophy. Aristotle notes in the *Metaphysics* that scientific inquiry first appeared in the places where people had leisure.<sup>7</sup> Since theoretical philosophy is not done for the sake of anything other than itself, it alone of the sciences is free.<sup>8</sup> But this is also the common opinion about the playful: it is done for the sake of nothing else and is therefore a free activity. Work is done so we can be at play: “Everybody’s working for the weekend.”

If this is true, philosophy and the playful are rivals for the same place in human life—that is, unless philosophy can be playful or the playful can serve philosophy.<sup>9</sup> But if they are rivals, what is to decide between them? Later in the dialogue Antisthenes explains the advantage of not pursuing material wealth: “The most exquisite possession, leisure, is always available to me so that I can behold the worthiest sights, listen to the worthiest sounds and, what I value most, spend the day at leisure with Socrates” (4.44). Antisthenes’ discretionary time is thus determined by his assessment of the value of the activity. How human beings spend their free time is a reflection of who they are and what they believe the good of human life is. Some spend their free time with friends or family; others seek out thrilling amusements; still others spend time in quiet reflection. Indeed, we can even formulate an ethical imperative for the choice of leisure activity: *of all the possible things you could do at this moment, do that which is the best*. Of course, those who care enough to formulate such an imperative take their leisure rather seriously. We might even expect such people to be prejudiced against the playful, even to the point of avoiding it. In a moment we will turn to Socrates to see if this expectation is confirmed. But we should not yet

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<sup>6</sup> Indeed, Socrates vetoes the proposal to bring out perfume, because perfume makes slaves and freemen smell alike, while the olive oil on their bodies from bathing at the gymnasium gives them the smell of free exertion (*ἀπὸ τῶν ἐλευθερίων μόχθων*)(2.3-4).

<sup>7</sup> “It was when almost all the necessities of life and the things that make for comfort and recreation were present, that such knowledge began to be sought.” Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, A2, 982b22-24. Cf. A1, 981b12 ff. *The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation*, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton University Press, 1984).

<sup>8</sup> *μόνην ἐλευθέραν τῶν ἐπιστημῶν*. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, A2, 982b27.

<sup>9</sup> As if to confirm this rivalry between philosophy and the playful, Aristotle discusses and dismisses the life of play immediately before he turns to discussing the contemplative life (*E.N.* 10.6). He writes: “Happiness does not consist in play [*παιδιά*], for it would even be absurd for our end to be play, and to work hard and undergo troubles all through one’s life for the sake of playing...To be earnest and to labor for the sake of play seems foolish and too childish” (1176b27-30, 32-33).

conclude that the playful has no place for those who regard philosophy as the highest good. Descartes gives beautiful advice to the contrary in a letter to Princess Elizabeth: “Our nature is so constituted that our mind needs much relaxation if it is to be able to spend usefully a few moments in the search for truth. Too great application to study does not refine the mind, but wears it down.”<sup>10</sup> In such a way one can be serious about one’s play as a means of relaxation, even using it in the service of better philosophy.

## II.

We cannot rule out, of course, that Socrates engages in playfulness for the sake of relaxation. But Xenophon’s account of the dinner party reveals a more complex relationship to the playful on the part of Socrates. At the first opportunity for philosophical discussion something rather peculiar happens. We are used to seeing the Socrates of the Platonic dialogues jumping at any chance to discuss, in spite of some reluctance voiced on the part of the interlocutor. And so here in Xenophon a dispute breaks out concerning one of Socrates’ favorite subjects: the teachability of virtue. But Socrates doesn’t want to interrupt the evening entertainment: “Since this is disputable, let’s put it off for another time...For I, at least, see that this dancing girl has taken her place and that some hoops have been brought to her” (2.7). Again, later on that evening, Callias makes the preposterous—and perhaps not entirely serious—claim that he educates human beings to be just by giving them money: injustice is committed out of need, and those with money can provide for the necessities. When Antisthenes, Socrates’ all too loyal companion, attacks Callias’ argument, Socrates comes to the latter’s defense, thus putting an end to the discussion (4.1-6).

What are we to make of Socrates’ behavior? Several possible answers present themselves. Like a normal human being, Socrates may not always be in the mood to talk about serious philosophical topics, despite Plato’s presentation of him.<sup>11</sup> Perhaps Socrates has a genuine interest in the musical performance: he reports in the *Phaedo* that a recurring dream

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<sup>10</sup> Descartes to Princess Elizabeth, 6 October 1645, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes, Volume III: The Correspondence*, trans. J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff, et al. (Cambridge University Press, 1991) AT IV 307.

<sup>11</sup> One may recall the end of Plato’s *Symposium*, in which, after a night of conversation and moderate to heavy drinking, Socrates heads to the agora to spend his day like any other.

commands him to make music.<sup>12</sup> Or perhaps he already has in mind certain topics he wishes to discuss, and when the conversation strays from his agenda he cuts it off or redirects it. What, then, are we to make of Socrates cutting off the dispute over Callias' preposterous suggestion? Callias is the host of the symposium, and Xenophon's Socrates is much more concerned with propriety than Plato's.<sup>13</sup> It may be that he is trying to be polite. But perhaps we will find something more to Socrates' treatment of Callias in the sequel.

Up to this point in our reflections, the serious and the playful have mostly been set against each other: either an activity is serious or it is playful. But the person of Socrates challenges this opposition, precisely through the difficulty in separating the times when Socrates is being playful and the times when he is being serious. There are several reasons for this difficulty. (1) Often the words of Socrates appear in the text without accompanying narration; the reader, not knowing Socrates' facial expression or tone of voice, is left to guess whether the remarks are serious or playful. (2) Sometimes the reader is given indications of Socrates' demeanor, but they are the opposite of what one might expect. Socrates says something ridiculous, but retains his composure—or even protests his seriousness. (3) Finally, Socrates often appears to be saying something in jest, but his words could be given a serious meaning upon further reflection. One is left wondering when to look for a deeper meaning and when to enjoy the joke without further thought. (Incidentally, these reasons for questioning Socrates' level of seriousness are not unique to Xenophon; they also pose a significant challenge in understanding the Platonic dialogues. Socrates' retelling of the encounter with Thrasymachus, for instance, has a playfulness that is not usually appreciated.<sup>14</sup> And one only needs to read Aristotle's *Topics* to learn that dialectic itself has a game-like quality.)

At two different points in Xenophon's *Symposium* Socrates makes statements that at first appear to be pure jest, but which have a serious intention underlying them. In the first of these episodes, Socrates praises the instructor of the dancers and asks him to teach him the dancing

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<sup>12</sup> Plato, *Phaedo*, 60e. Socrates sings a song later on in Xenophon's *Symposium* (7.1-2).

<sup>13</sup> Cf. the iteration of the phrase "as was fitting" (ὡσπερ εἰκός) at (1.7-8).

<sup>14</sup> Thrasymachus is sometimes characterized as an arch-sophist who detests Socrates and wants nothing to do with genuine philosophical investigation, especially in its Socratic form. However, as far as we know, Thrasymachus remains for the entirety of a conversation that lasts long into the night. He speaks up again in Book 5 (450a-b) and Socrates appears to be teasing him in Book 6 (498c-d). If the all-out battle in Book 1 were entirely serious, it is doubtful that Thrasymachus would remain of his own free will. It is more likely that Socrates' descriptions of his opponent "hunched up like a wild beast," sweating profusely, and blushing are mixed with more than a small bit of playfulness (cf. 336b, 350c-d). *The Republic of Plato*, trans. Allan Bloom (Basic Books, 1968).

routines. The instructor asks Socrates what he would do with these routines, and he replies, “I’ll dance, by Zeus!” When everyone laughs at this, Socrates’ face becomes very serious (*ἐσπουδακότι τῷ προσώπῳ*), and he asks why they are laughing if dancing is so good for exercising the whole body. Charmides has even caught him dancing at daybreak—evidence that he was earnest in what he said (2.16-17). However, even if there is a serious point to Socrates’ desire for dancing lessons, his scolding still has a playful element. Despite his apparent clarification of his intention, one remains uncertain where to draw the line between the playful and the serious.

While the remarks on dancing are mostly contained within an isolated incident, Socrates’ relationship to playfulness in the next episode provides the key to understanding much of the dialogue. By far the largest section of the work (over a third) is devoted to the guests answering Callias’ challenge for each to reveal the most valuable thing he knows [how to do] (*πλείστον ἄξιον ἐπίστασθαι*), with a view to delighting and benefiting one another (3.3). They respond with varying levels of seriousness, and some of them fail to answer the question as stated. After only one of the speeches does Xenophon add the line: “This speech was delivered seriously [*ἐσπουδαιολογήθη*]” (4.50). This is the speech of Hermogenes, a serious fellow who keeps quiet and does not see the value of play. Socrates, for his part, is asked what he prides himself on, and Xenophon records his response: “Socrates, drawing up his face in a very solemn manner, said, ‘On pimping.’ When they laughed at him, he said, ‘You laugh, but I know that I would make a great deal of money should I wish to make use of this art’” (4.10). Again, we have Socrates protesting that he is serious about something that appears ridiculous to the rest of the company.

Only in the sequel do we discover the serious intent underlying this statement. When Callias later asks why he prides himself on this art, Socrates discusses the pimp’s tasks (*ἔργα τοῦ μαστροποῦ*). The good pimp presents a boy or girl pleasingly, and therefore he must teach what is beneficial for pleasing. Indeed, the best pimp deserves large sums of money for showing his boys and girls “in a manner pleasing to the entire city” (4.56-60). If this is how a pimp’s tasks are defined, then clearly Socrates has failed to succeed as a pimp. Without doubt he teaches the young something; but instead of making them pleasing to the city, this education arouses its anger against Socrates. As Xenophon portrays him, Socrates educates not to please but to benefit—that is, he teaches what has true value for his students and the city.

But if we take another look, Socrates bears a closer relationship to the pimp than his relationship to the city would indicate. Like the man who goes between the prostitute and her clients, Socrates aims both to please and to benefit—or, perhaps, to please *in order to* benefit. Such a person recognizes those who are beneficial (*ὠφελίμοι*) for one another and makes them desire one another (4.64).<sup>15</sup> In the *Memorabilia* Socrates reveals his talent for doing this to Theodotē, a woman whom Xenophon describes in his characteristically discreet way as “the sort to keep company with whoever persuaded her” (3.11.1).<sup>16</sup> As evidence of his power for attracting “clients,” Socrates points to his numerous young followers, whom he claims to have seduced with love charms (3.11.17). Theodotē responds by asking him to be her pimp (3.11.15). In the context of the *Symposium*, Socrates reveals this same talent for pleasing in bringing about the discussion of the most valuable thing each knows: he proposes a speech for the purpose of benefiting (*ὠφελεῖν*) and delighting (*εὐφραίνειν*) one another (3.2).<sup>17</sup>

By playfully attributing the pimp’s tasks to himself in these episodes, Socrates introduces two concepts that will allow us to define more precisely the relationship between the serious and the playful. As a good pimp and “go-between,” Socrates deals in (1) what is pleasing/delightful, and (2) what is beneficial/advantageous—although the exact relationship between these concepts is still ambiguous. Socrates also indicates the importance of these concepts for his own educational activity: the good pimp “teaches what is advantageous with a view to pleasing” (4.59), and Socrates connects his talent as a go-between to his ability to attract followers—the most direct recipients of the “Socratic education.” How do these concepts help to define the relationship between the playful and the serious? The playful clearly has a pleasing aspect: joking and playing around are fun and bring obvious enjoyment. I suspect that this is what Socrates has in mind when proposing a speech for the company to delight one another. Such a conversation provides an obvious platform for the kind of playful banter at which Socrates himself excels. But Socrates also makes the proposal with a view toward *benefiting*. Here the serious enters once again. Something is beneficial if it advances the good of a human being, and

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<sup>15</sup> Cf. “The core of education, we say, is a correct nurture, one which, as much as possible, draws the soul of the child at play toward an erotic attachment to what he must do when he becomes a man who is perfect as regards the virtue of his occupation” (643c8-d3). *The Laws of Plato*, trans. Thomas L. Pangle (University of Chicago Press, 1988).

<sup>16</sup> I thank Jason Taylor for calling my attention to this passage.

<sup>17</sup> To be precise, Socrates first proposes that Callias display his wisdom, and Callias extends the discussion to the rest of the group, with the approval of Socrates. But Socrates clearly sets the discussion in motion and defines its “purpose.”

the good of a human being is a serious matter—perhaps the most serious. In fact, the stated purpose of Xenophon’s *Memorabilia* is to recall the ways in which Socrates benefited his companions (1.3.1) in order to counter the charge that he corrupted them. With respect to Socrates, what is beneficial is tied—directly or indirectly—to the moral or philosophical education by which he leads his companions to happiness.

If benefiting and pleasing have the connection to the serious and the playful that I have indicated, the relationship between these first two concepts will help us discern the relationship between the last two. How do benefiting and pleasing relate in the case of Socrates? Must they be related at all? Socrates’ role as a go-between already suggests one kind of relationship: the go-between uses what is pleasing to create the desire for what is beneficial (cf. 4.64). In other words, he pleases in order to benefit. Since Socrates benefits his companions through his educational activity, one can say that his playfulness serves the purpose of education. We see this most readily in the way in which Socrates charms his followers. Socrates’ playfulness makes him fun to be around, and he uses his charm to attract those he wishes to educate. As he relates to Theodotē, “many love charms, incantations, and spells” are needed to keep his followers at his side (*Mem.* 3.11.17). Once they are there, Socrates can go about the serious business of educating. But even in the process of teaching, his playfulness has a role to play. Just as comedy allows for the expression of controversial and otherwise painful truths, Socrates is able to teach in play what his students would refuse to accept in seriousness.

This use of the playful accounts for Socrates’ peculiar behavior toward Callias mentioned above. Callias, the host of the banquet, is in love with the boy Autolycus, who emerged victorious from the games: the symposium celebrates his victory. I suspect that, because Socrates wishes to educate Callias in the proper way to be a lover, he employs playfulness and flattery to make him receptive to his teaching about the superiority of friendship (*φιλία*) and the love of the soul over the love of the body. Socrates recognizes that Callias is not the sort of person who can be educated through serious philosophical argument. Although Callias brags that he is able “to say many wise things” (1.6), he shows more concern for impressing others (especially Autolycus) than a genuine interest in the truth. Whether or not Callias is speaking in jest when he claims to teach justice by giving away money (cf. 4.1), his past association with various sophists (1.5) indicates a mercenary attitude toward wisdom and dialectical argument. If Socrates is to get through to Callias, he must appeal, not to philosophical arguments, but to his pride. Socrates,

therefore, encourages and participates in the kind of playfulness that will enliven the dinner party and give Callias confidence in his own abilities as host. This creates the environment in which Socrates can praise Callias for the very attributes he wishes to instill in him, without this praise sounding artificial.

Unfortunately, Hermogenes threatens this educational strategy with his persistent seriousness; although Socrates never shows it directly, he must have been extremely annoyed. Socrates even tries to draw Hermogenes out of his seriousness by accusing him of “convivial misbehavior”—“giving pain, under the influence of wine, to one’s companions” (6.1-2). Imagine what Socrates could have been thinking when Hermogenes, serious to the point of being blind, blows his cover: “By Hera, Socrates! I admire...that you are now gratifying Callias even as you are teaching him the sort of person he ought to be” (8.12).

In his persistent seriousness Hermogenes serves as an obvious foil for Socrates, who can successfully mix the serious with the playful. What Xenophon says after Socrates challenges a handsome youth to a beauty contest could well be said of much of Socrates’ activity: “Thus they were both joking and being serious in mixed fashion” (4.28-9).<sup>18</sup> But what is the precise character of this mixing? Up to this point, we have characterized the relationship between the two elements in terms of ends and means: Socrates uses the playful in pursuit of a serious goal. But if this is an exhaustive characterization of their relationship for Socrates, then he too is persistently serious—even when appearing to be playful. The playful as such is unessential for him; it has value only insofar as it serves the serious and, therefore, is itself serious.

If this is true, what is it that distinguishes Socrates from Hermogenes? Both are always serious—at least, up to this point in our reflections. The difference between the two lies in the capacity of each to integrate playful elements into an overarching seriousness. Hermogenes is not unaware of the potential utility of the playful, as his imprudent revelation of Socrates’ educational strategy shows. Yet he is not able to make use of this potential, because his seriousness always manifests itself “in the moment.” He cannot be serious about something without at the same time acting serious, and thereby refusing to accommodate himself to the social situation. This makes Hermogenes a caricature of seriousness, since his seriousness always takes the form of an affect—never smiling, forever brooding, even at a dinner party. Socrates, on

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<sup>18</sup> Καὶ οὗτοι μὲν δὴ οὕτως ἀναμιξὶ ἔσκωψάν τε καὶ ἐσπούδασαν. (My translation.) Cf. “These were the sorts of thing he used to say with a playfulness accompanied by seriousness [ἔπαιζεν ἅμα σπουδάζων]” (*Mem.* 1.3.8).

the other hand, shows that affect or mood is the least essential element in true seriousness. One can be serious without always being serious in the moment. For a short time, one can “forget oneself” in play and appear lacking in seriousness to any casual observer. But one who knows more about Socrates’ character can place these moments of play within a larger, serious context.

### III.

In the last section we considered a relatively simple account of the relationship between the serious and the playful in the person of Socrates. According to this account, Socrates’ playful actions serve a serious purpose, either to “seduce” those he wishes to educate, or to wrap his teaching in a form that is more likely to persuade and less likely to meet resistance. However, this account does not explain the phenomenon we noted earlier, namely, the difficulty in discerning when Socrates is playful and when he is serious. At times Socrates protests his seriousness, even when he appears to be joking or saying something ridiculous. For instance, he boasts about his talents as a pimp while maintaining a solemn expression on his face, and he chides his companions for laughing at him (4.10). One could supply examples from the Platonic dialogues as well: Alcibiades suspects that Socrates is making fun of him, but Socrates denies it—even swearing by the god of friendship.<sup>19</sup> In all these instances, it seems wrong simply to take Socrates at his word. Even his protests of seriousness have a playful element. On the other hand, one can hardly ignore these protests and regard the episodes as exclusively playful. More often than not, further examination reveals layers of serious meaning.

Why, then, does Socrates encourage this ambiguity with respect to the playful and the serious in his actions? This question is intertwined with the question of Socrates’ famous irony. The latter involves the same difficulty in determining Socrates’ level of earnestness, and in separating out serious meaning from jest or dissimulation. When Socrates insists that he doesn’t know anything of consequence, for instance, to what extent is he earnest and to what extent is he just kidding? Indeed, Alcibiades, in his speech at the end of Plato’s *Symposium*, connects the playful and serious with Socrates’ use of irony: “All his life he keeps on being ironical [εἰρωνευόμενος] and playful [παίζων] to human beings. And when he is serious [σπουδάσαντος]

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<sup>19</sup> 109d.

and opened up, I do not know if anyone has seen the images within.”<sup>20</sup> Here the playful is allied with irony because it masks the serious. Or perhaps it would be better to say: playfulness, used ironically, masks the boundary between itself and the serious. As Vlastos defines it, “complex irony” is meaning what one says in one sense, but not meaning what one says in another sense.<sup>21</sup> If we rephrase this in terms of seriousness, irony is being serious in one sense and not serious in another. The difficulty, of course, is in drawing the line.

The resulting ambiguity between the playful and the serious creates an unsettling effect among Socrates’ companions as well as the readers of Socratic writings. This unsettling effect, I submit, is one of the reasons that Socrates maintains the ambiguity. Once again, the mixing of the playful and the serious serves the purposes of education. The line between the two elements is normally defined by our social conventions of what is appropriate or inappropriate, reasonable or ridiculous. The image of Socrates learning the dance routines so that he can dance (2.16-17) is funny because of our assumptions about what is appropriate for someone of Socrates’ age and social position. But when Socrates blurs the line between the playful and the serious, one suddenly can no longer take for granted the previous assumptions about what is socially acceptable—at least, as these apply to Socrates. In the presence of Socrates, social conventions become questionable, and this creates an unsettling effect. Once his students are no longer standing on the solid ground provided by society’s norms, they are in a better position to inquire into the truth.

The ambiguity is pedagogically useful for another reason, that gets at the heart of our own activity as readers of Xenophon and Plato. When hearing other people speak seriously, our natural inclination is to take them at their word: what they are saying is their own opinion on the matter. And when the person speaking has some authority, or is the object of our respect and admiration, we naturally give their opinion more weight—even if it is not supported by adequate reasons. However, this natural tendency is dangerous for someone like Socrates, who wishes to educate others in philosophy. Many of his companions greatly admire him, and, recognizing the limitations of their own philosophical abilities, would be all too willing to adopt his own doctrines on the basis of authority. Socrates’ ambiguity with respect to the playful and the serious helps prevent this. For the reasons noted in section two, one can never know how serious

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<sup>20</sup> 216e4-6. *Plato’s Symposium*, trans. Seth Benardete (University of Chicago Press, 1993 and 2001). (Translation modified.)

<sup>21</sup> Gregory Vlastos, “Socratic Irony,” *Classical Quarterly* 37 (1987) 79-96, p. 86.

Socrates is at any given moment, and so one can never be sure that he is giving his own opinion. Once it is recognized that it is futile to try to determine what Socrates thinks, one can begin the business of thinking for oneself, using Socrates' words as a starting point, but never the end.

Something similar can be said of our own situation as readers of these ancient texts. Xenophon's Socratic works, like their Platonic counterparts, do not impart Socratic doctrines so much as provide the occasion for thought. When Socrates says something that appears humorous, it is left to the discretion of the reader either to look for layers of meaning or just to enjoy the joke; a certain indeterminacy always remains. On the other hand, when Socrates says something that appears serious, one can never know for certain whether he really is so. As readers of Socrates, we have a natural inclination to assume that what he says is serious if we are given no indication otherwise, and it is not unusual for us to miss such indications when they do exist. Xenophon's *Symposium*, therefore, has an important interpretative lesson to teach us: one should not read Socrates on the assumption of seriousness. This lesson is perhaps more easily learned from Xenophon than it is from Plato, since Plato's Socrates provides us with so many interesting things to think about on a serious level. In contrast, Xenophon's Socrates, if read only seriously, is quite boring. Hence the popular conception of Socrates in the *Memorabilia* as the "tirelessly didactic, monotonously earnest" man who engages in "platitudinously wholesome moralizing."<sup>22</sup> If we abandon our prejudice against the playful, these texts begin to come alive. By noticing their ambiguity, we also benefit from Socrates' mixing of the serious and the playful.

Mention of this prejudice against the playful and for the serious hits close to home. In fact, one could say that a version of this prejudice has been operating in our own investigations up to this point. I have been attempting to explain Socrates' playfulness in terms of the education of his companions and the readers of Socratic texts. But why the desire to explain the playful in terms of the serious? Doesn't this arise out of a philosophical need to find purpose in everything—to leave nothing "without reason"? Philosophers, it is true, are a serious group on the whole. They are not necessarily adverse to play, but seriousness clearly has the superior position: they operate under the presupposition that what they are examining has serious meaning and is *worth* examining for that reason. This is all the more cause to pose the question: Could Socrates' play be gratuitous? Could he be playful for no other reason than to be playful?

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<sup>22</sup> Vlastos, "Socratic Irony," 85-86.

One can always keep this open as a possibility. Just as there is indeterminacy about where to draw the line between the playful and the serious, there could well be indeterminacy about whether there is always at bottom a serious motive, or whether there is sometimes an irreducible element of playfulness in what Socrates does.

Xenophon, however, gives us an account that paints Socrates as a thoughtful human being, who lived the happiest of lives as a result of his thoughtfulness. And part of being a thoughtful human being is the careful consideration of the kinds of activities to engage in. These activities are not considered in isolation, but within a wider context, and ultimately within one's life as a whole. If Socrates is a thoughtful human being in this sense, what he does he does because it is constitutive of what he takes to be the best life for him. This confers on all his activities a certain seriousness, since he intends them to serve a serious end—living the best life possible.

This account of Socrates does not imply that all his actions are a matter of “high seriousness.” Nothing prevents him from enjoying the simple pleasures involved in play, insofar as these form part of a happy life. And we would be wrong, I think, to require every detail of Socrates' life to be carefully calculated as part of a grand scheme to transform Athens. In fact, the playful has a role in the best life that resists calculation. This is the role of the playful within the context of friendship. Xenophon's *Symposium* culminates in Socrates' long speech in praise of friendship or love of the soul (*ψυχῆς φιλία*), which is to be preferred to the love of the body (*σώματος ἔρως*) (8.1-40). The *Symposium* as a whole is a testament to the kind of playfulness shared among friends. This relationship between friendship and playfulness goes two ways. (1) On the one hand, playfulness in isolation from other people is hollow, if not deranged. Unlike the serious, which does not require the presence of others, joking and playing around are inherently social. Moreover, the pleasure that one gains from playfulness is enhanced the closer one is to the people sharing in it; the best of friends enjoy each other's playfulness the most. (2) On the other hand, one of the marks of friendship is the ability of two people to kid around with one another comfortably, and to poke fun at one another's weaknesses without shame or resentment. We derive pleasure from such occasions, but the pleasure does not result from the playfulness *per se*; as Xenophon notes, the attendees of the banquet “take pleasure in one another” (*ἀλλήλοις ἠδόμενους*) (6.6). Because friendship and playfulness are so intertwined, Hermogenes' refusal to participate in the merriment of the guests carries social consequences.

Hermogenes is socially awkward, not only because his behavior does not conform to what is appropriate under the circumstances, but because his seriousness does not allow him to participate fully in friendship with his comrades.

Socrates, on the other hand, values friendship as one of the greatest goods; whatever educational role his playfulness may have in the *Symposium*, it also has a role in nurturing his friendships. One of the finest passages in the *Memorabilia* expresses the importance of friends for Socrates: “Just as another is pleased by a good horse or a dog or a bird, so I myself am even more pleased by good friends, and if I possess something good I teach it, and I introduce them to others from whom, I believe, they will receive some benefit with a view to virtue. And reading collectively with my friends, I go through the treasures of the wise men of old which they wrote and left behind in their books; and if we see something good, we pick it out; and we hold that it is a great gain if we become friends with one another” (1.6.14). Xenophon writes that, on hearing this, he formed the opinion that Socrates was blessed.

Socrates’ friendships, together with his characteristic blend of the playful and serious, persist up to his final moments. His follower, Apollodorus, approaches him after his trial and says that the thing that troubles him the most is that Socrates will die unjustly. Socrates replies: “Dearest Apollodorus, would you prefer to see me die justly?”<sup>23</sup> Socrates laughs, and we can imagine that his friends join in the laughter, even finding it comforting. But in this final joke Socrates also has something serious to teach—about the proper way to live and the proper way to die.

#### IV.

We are now in a position to return to the opening line of Xenophon’s *Symposium*: “But in my opinion, not only are the serious deeds of gentlemen worth recalling, but so too are their deeds done in times of play” (1.1). Why, then, are the playful deeds of Socrates worth recalling? The answer to this question depends, of course, on Xenophon’s purposes in writing the work. One purpose is clearly the continuation of the project he began in the *Memorabilia*: to recall the ways in which Socrates benefited his companions in word and deed, in order to counter the

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<sup>23</sup> Xenophon, *Apology of Socrates*, §28. *The Shorter Socratic Writings*, ed. Robert Bartlett.

charge that he corrupted them (1.3.1).<sup>24</sup> Since the playful has a questionable status among the Greeks, as we have seen, it is likely that certain Athenians saw Socrates' play as a dangerous influence on his companions, with potentially subversive implications for religion and the established order. Against such views, Xenophon writes: "When [Socrates] was playing around [παίζων] he was no less profitable to those who spent time with him than when he was serious [σπουδάζων]" (4.1.1).<sup>25</sup> The *Symposium* is Xenophon's demonstration of this position. It attempts to show Socrates promoting the moral virtues through his playfulness, at the same time as it downplays the subversive effects of his activity.

But Xenophon's purpose in writing extends beyond this apologetic project: he also understands Socrates' playful deeds as "worth recollecting" because such a recollection will benefit the readers of the text. In other words, Xenophon wishes to educate his readers through the depiction of Socrates in his playfulness, and thereby continue at second hand the educational mission begun by Socrates before him. He notes in the *Memorabilia* that "even remembering [Socrates] when he was not present was of no small benefit to his followers" (4.1.1), and we can infer that the same applies to readers who have never met Socrates. The reader is able to profit from the playfulness of the text for many of the same reasons that Socrates' companions profited in person. On the one hand, the playful character of the dialogue attracts us to the person of Socrates and makes us more receptive to lines of questioning we would otherwise resist. On the other hand, these recollections show the difficulty in separating the serious from the playful—a difficulty that carries over to Socrates' (apparently) more serious activities outside the *Symposium*. Like Socrates' companions and conversation partners, the readers of the text are thrown off balance by this difficulty, recovering only to realize the futility of determining for certain Socrates' level of seriousness at any given moment. This makes it impossible to learn his opinions through reading the text, and thus paves the way for readers to take on the task of thinking with Socrates.

Encouraging others in this task is at the heart of Socrates' mission, a mission he takes seriously, and he embraces the playful in service of that mission. And so the question of Socrates' relationship to the playful and the serious depends upon the most important of

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<sup>24</sup> Bartlett makes the helpful suggestion that Xenophon begins the *Symposium* with the particle "but" (ἀλλά) in response to an unstated objection about the value of the playful. "On the *Symposium*," 174. One could also view this particle as connecting the *Memorabilia* to the *Symposium*: the former focuses mostly on the serious deeds, *but* the playful deeds are also worth recalling for the same purpose.

<sup>25</sup> (Translation modified.)

questions: how does one live a good life? The best life for Socrates is to direct others to the best life, and he accomplishes this by mixing the playful and the serious. In this way, his play is tied to the education of others: his *παιδιά* is tied to *παιδεία*.<sup>26</sup>

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