

SOCRATES' HUMOUR AND PLATO'S GAMES IN THE COMMENTARIES OF LATE NEOPLATONISTS

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ABSTRACT. The irony of Socrates is one of the essential elements of Plato's dialogues. However, what appears ironic or playful to modern readers, was not apprehended in the same way by Neoplatonic commentators. For Proclus, one of problematic Plato's passages concerns the "laborious game," which refers to the refined eight hypotheses of the *Parmenides*. Proclus turns to various places of Plato's dialogues where different games are mentioned. Some of them are mimetic arts, which are partly restricted in Plato's *Republic*. Other games are distinguished as pertaining to "old men" and to children: the former is appropriate to philosophers, while the latter is not. Even the "laborious" mode of Parmenides' playing is given an ontological interpretation. Damascius was aware of the "Parmenides' game" problem, but he primarily used ready Proclean interpretation. Unsurprisingly, Damascius approaches the conclusion that Parmenides was not playing at all – despite the apparent wording of Plato and minute investigations of Proclus. The extant writings of Simplicius contain no dedicated Platonic commentaries. However, the commentary on Epictetus' *Enchiridion* contains a verbose argument on human laughter and its role in a philosopher's ethos. In general, Simplicius continues Damascius' trend of rigorous seriousness. Olympiodorus the Younger follows his predecessors in a mere serious reading of Plato, but he acknowledges numerous instances of Socrates' irony and joking. However, Olympiodorus dissociates Plato from Socrates' irony and emphasises its purely didactic extent. Generally, we can conclude that the later a Neoplatonic commentator is, the less perceptive to Plato's humour he appears.

KEYWORDS: Plato, Parmenides, game, Socrates, irony, Proclus Lycaeus, Damascius, Simplicius, Olympiodorus the Younger.

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For it is impossible to learn the serious without the comic.

Plato, *Laws* VII, 816d9–e1; Bury 1926, 97.

The irony of Socrates and Plato's reasoning on games and laughter in the *Republic* and *Laws* are well-known and widely discussed in modern studies. Much less are studied Neoplatonic interpretations of Plato's humour.¹ Several scholars have marked almost incomprehensibility of Plato's humour for Proclus (Baltzly 2007, viii; Tanner 2017, 103; Kurdybaylo 2021, 54). Moreover, later Neoplatonist seem to be even less sensitive to it. Below, we will see the pains taken by Damascius and Olympiodorus to acknowledge the comical extent of Plato's writings. In general, laughter, games and jokes are the less acceptable for a Neoplatonic philosopher, the later period of Middle Ages we consider.

1. Proclus on the "laborious game" of Plato's *Parmenides*

One of the highly perplexing passages of Plato's *Parmenides* is 137a7–b3:

Parmenides said: ... "What shall we hypothesize first? Since it seems I must play this laborious game (πραγματειώδη παιδιᾶν παίζειν), shall I begin with myself and take my own hypothesis? ..." (Allen 1997, 16–17)

Why does Parmenides call his following discourse a "laborious game," which he is going to "play"? Since Plotinus, the *Parmenides* has not been considered a dialectical exercise anymore,² and all the following Neoplatonic tradition was extracting fundamental metaphysical consequences from its famous eight (sometimes nine or even ten³) hypotheses.

Proclus has an explanation of Parmenides' "playfulness," but first, let us look at his definition of playing games in general. There are two important passages in the Commentary on the *Parmenides* and in the *Theology of Plato*. The first one considers what things present in the sensible realm do *not* have a proper intellectual form (εἶδος):

Of these arts [i.e. arithmetic, geometry, and astronomy], then, we must posit Forms (εἶδη), and of all others that lead the soul upwards and that we require as we move towards the intelligible world (εἰς τὸ νοητόν). But all those that the soul uses when it is at play (παιζούσης), or occupied with mortal things, or ministering to the needs of human life (τὰς ἀνθρωπίνης χρείας θεραπευούσης) — of none of these is there an intel-

¹ See: Halliwell 2008; Radke 2006; Heath 2019.

² See review of pre-Neoplatonic interpretations of the *Parmenides* in: Dillon, Morrow 1987, xxiv–xxvii.

³ Proclus tells about a mysterious "philosopher from Rhodes," who arranged ten hypotheses "balancing the first five with the last five" (in *Parm.* 1057.5–1058.5, Cousin 1961).

lectual Form (οὐδεμίας εἰδός ἐστι νοερόν). The soul, however, has a power residing in its opinative faculty of bringing forward theorems that it is by nature able to produce and to judge; but there are no distinct Ideas at all of the arts or of their products (εἴδη τῶν τεχνῶν ἢ τῶν τεχνητῶν οὐδαμῶς ἔστι).⁴

Further, Proclus gives two examples of the arts that do not have a form: the art of bronze-working and that of weaving (*in Parm.* 829.14–21). Therefore, the difference between these “playful” arts and the “scientific” ones should be either because of their relation to artwork or because of their dependence on processing material objects (as contrasted to pure sciences).

The second passage touching upon the games of the soul is located in the fifth book of the *Theology of Plato*:

The myth says, therefore, that Prometheus adorned the human race, and forethought our rational life, so that we could not be “submerged in the passions of the earth,”⁵ and be destroyed by the necessities of nature, as one of the gods says. [He] bound arts to the nature, and proposed [these arts] to playing souls (παιζούσαις ταῖς ψυχαῖς) as imitations of the intellect (τοῦ νοῦ μιμήματα), and through these excited our gnostic and dianoetic [power] to the contemplation of forms (τῶν εἰδῶν θεωρίαν). For every production of arts (τεχνικὴ ποίησις) produces forms (εἰδοποιός) and adorns (κοσμητικὴ) the underlying matter (τῆς ὑποκειμένης ὕλης).⁶

The examples of bronze-making and weaving in connection with Hephaestus and Athena are given further almost in the same way as in the discussed passage of the *in Parmenidem*. As far as these mundane arts symbolically reflect the intelligible activities of “great” Hephaestus and Athena (*in Parm.* 829.13–16), similarly, the “games” of a soul are “imitations” of the intellectual activities, which probably should be considered purely serious. The opposition of mundane activities as games to the intelligible realm of inevitable seriousness is maintained by Proclus many times.⁷

Now let us look, how the “laborious game” of Parmenides can be explained from the Proclean point of view:

... Parmenides utters these phrases in imitation of the divinity, and not these only, but also the phrase “to play out this laborious game.” This also is divine, to call his clear and many-faceted procedures “games” (πολυμερίστους ἐνεργείας παιδιὰς καλεῖν); for each of men and other things is a “plaything” of the gods (παίγνιον θεῶν, *Laws VII*, 803c), all such as are brought to being by their outgoing energies. Every swift reason

⁴ Proclus, *in Parm.* 828.40–829.9; Dillon, Morrow 1987, 189.

⁵ *Chald. Or.* fr. 114 des Places, translation of this fragment and the surrounding sentence: Majercik 1989, 93.

⁶ Proclus, *Theol. Plat.* 5.87.22–88.4. Translation: Taylor 1995, 355, with our changes.

⁷ See references in: Heath 2019; Kurdybaylo 2021.

(πάς ὀξύς λόγος) is thus a “game” (παιδιάν), compared to the calm and unitary intellection of Being (τοῦ ὄντος νόησιν), but it is nevertheless “laborious” because it has to do with (ἄπτεται) the contemplation of [real] beings (τῶν ὄντων ... θεωρίας), and unfolds the simplicity of the intellection within, and is nothing else but, as it were, an unravelling of intellections and a “rending apart” of undivided cognition (τῆς ἀμεροῦς γνώσεως σπαραγμός).⁸

What Proclus actually calls a game here, is problematic. John Dillon translated πάς ὀξύς λόγος as “every external argument,” and above we have proposed another reading: “every swift reason.” Literally, ὀξύς means “sharp, keen” both in verbal and figurative senses (LSJ 1996, 1236). As far as it is opposed to anything “calm and unitary,” the game is expected to be mobile, dynamical and manifold, especially in the view of πολυμερίστους in the previous sentence.

Moreover, the “game” is opposed to “intellection of being” (τοῦ ὄντος νόησιν), but it is called “laborious” as being connected with “contemplation of beings” (τῶν ὄντων θεωρίας). Should there be any significant difference between “the being” in singular and in plural, as well as between “intellection” and “contemplation”?

Probably, here could be the same two-level logic as in quoted passages of *in Parmenidem* and *Theologia Platonica*. The art of daemonic Hephaestus is, on the one hand, applied by a human soul to mundane objects and, on the other hand, is symbolically prefigured by “the great Hephaestus.” Similarly, Parmenides’ game may be related to *logoi* and *theoria* as proper activities of a soul, but symbolically this game imitates the *noesis* of pure intellect. Finally, the soul’s external expression is an activity that brings intelligible calmness, rest, and unity into material unsteadiness, motion, and multiplicity. However, at this point, almost every expressive activity of a soul can be called “a laborious game.” Thus, we need a narrower definition of the game to specify Parmenides’ activity.

Further, proceeding with the discussion of Parmenides’ game, Proclus distinguishes the games “of old men” and those of children:

For it was impossible for all the affirmative (τὰ καταφατικά) and negative (τὰ ἀποφατικά) and both affirmative and negative (τὰ συναμφότερα) propositions to be true of the One taken in only one sense — for example, the proposition that the One is neither the same nor different; and again, that it is both the same and different, and once again, that it is both the same and not the same, different and not different. So then, anyone who wants to draw all these conclusions about the same subject is truly engaged in idle sport (ὄντως ἀθύρειν), and is “pursuing a game proper” not “to old men” but to children (παιδιάν οὐ πρεσβυτικὴν, ἀλλὰ παιδαριώδη), when indulging in that.⁹

⁸ Proclus, *in Parm.* 1036.2–15; Dillon, Morrow 1987, 382, with our changes.

⁹ Proclus, *in Parm.* 1040.24–34; Dillon, Morrow 1987, 401.

The “games of old men” is a quotation of Plato’s *Laws* 685a, “playing an old man’s sober games with laws.”¹⁰ These “games with laws” are actually close to Parmenides’ “laborious game,” as both are opposite to non-philosophical, “childish,” i.e. purely entertaining games. Proclus insists on the impossibility of predicating the One opposite properties simultaneously and in the same sense. This logically contradictory approach is nothing but “idle sport,” game on words without any rational benefit. Therefore, “old man’s game” should be logically consistent or, in other words, follow proper rules. Here we can remember that the whole Plato’s ideal State is expected to live a playful life, but “spending one’s whole life at play”¹¹ should be by all means according to the *laws*, both of gods and of humans.

Probably, the principal difference between the games of “old men” and of children could be explained in terms of their accordance with Plato’s *Laws*. Noticeably, Plato allows some arts to exist in his State, while others are either entirely prohibited or allowed under a certain oversight (cf. *Lg* 816d3–817d8). Arithmetic, geometry and astronomy, as mentioned by Proclus in *in Parm.* 828–829, are those which are doubtlessly allowed to exist in Plato’s State (*Lg* 817e4–818b6 et ff.). Thus, they are “serious” occupations of a soul as opposed to “games” of either kind.

However, the discourse on the properties of the One still remains a game. Even being performed in the most “sober” way, this reasoning is nothing more but a sophisticated chess game between two experienced players. Why is not it serious?

Some clues can be found in another Proclean passage:

But since Parmenides denies and asserts different propositions in the different hypotheses, and often denies (ἀποφάσκει) and asserts (καταφάσκει) the same things at different stages on different subjects, and is in general clearly playing a “laborious game” (ὄντως πραγματειώδη παιδιὰν παίζων) and working his way through the whole nature of things, and is not, as some have absurdly held, simply pursuing a soulless and empty logical exercise (ἄψυχόν τινα καὶ κενὴν ... τὴν λογικὴν γυμνασίαν), nor showing off grandly his command of plausible arguments, it occurred to those of our predecessors who have approached the works of Plato with genuine insight to fit the proper subject matters to these hypotheses, in order that there should be evident in each hypothesis a certain order of entities (τις τάξις τῶν ὄντων) uncovered by Parmenides’ method.¹²

Continuing the discourse of “old man’s game,” Proclus appreciates two main

¹⁰ *περὶ νόμων παίζοντας παιδιὰν πρεσβυτικὴν σώφρονα*. Translation based on: Bury 1961, 195. Cf. also *Lg* 769a1–2: *πρεσβυτῶν ... παιδιὰ ... διαπεπαισμένη*.

¹¹ *παίζοντά ἐστιν διαβιωτέον τινὰς δὴ παιδιάς* — *Lg* 803e1; Cooper 1997, 1472.

¹² Proclus, *in Parm.* 1051.35–1052.9; Dillon, Morrow 1987, 410.

qualities of Parmenides' discourse. The first is his ability to assert and deny the same things from different standpoints, and the second is his ability to connect each hypothesis with a certain being (or orders of beings). If he could lose the first ability, his game would be "childish" or a kind of "idle sport" — that is what Proclus has explained in the previous passage. But what happens if Parmenides loses the second ability, i.e. if his discussion were just a "logical exercise"?

In another passage above, we have read that Parmenides' game is "laborious" because it approaches "the contemplation of beings" (*in Parm.* 1036.11–12), or even "real beings," as John Dillon emendates. Therefore, if the game is not "laborious," it may mean that it does not consider "real beings" and therefore is isolated in the realm of pure dialectics, irrelevant to ontological matters.

Finally, we can summarise the main properties of Parmenides' "game," as Proclus describes it. Firstly, Parmenides is playing, and he is playing a game, because what he discusses is a long series of various predicates that can be apophatically or cataphatically ascribed to *the one* he is talking about. As far as the multitude of predicates is great, it is too distant from *the one*, therefore constituting something playful, while simple and unitary things are related to as serious and sober. However, the game of Parmenides can assist a soul in ascending the intelligible realm in the same way as certain arts can excite "playing souls ... to the contemplation of forms."¹³ Similarly, Parmenides' game is called an "old men's game" and is opposed to childish amusements because of precise "rules," which it follows, namely the dialectical method of hypothesising, strictly held throughout the whole Parmenides' discussion. Moreover, this game is also "laborious" because it is not just a pure dialectical procedure but relates to entities that really exist. Therefore, in addition to formal "rules," such a game should also follow the order of intelligible beings. Actually, the activity of Parmenides appears to be difficult and quite serious; it is called a game not as an entertainment but as an activity that pertains to the lower levels of reality, where unity turns into multiplicity, simplicity becomes complexity, and indivisible is divided. Although the "laborious game" is not a philosophy proper — as the latter should be serious and solemn — nevertheless, it deals with real intelligible entities, it leads souls to their contemplation, and exactly follows that very way of life, which Plato prescribed to the citizens of his ideal State, i.e. the life in playing prudent games.

In any case, the Proclean exegesis of Parmenides' "laborious game" is closely interwoven with several other Plato's mentions of games, primarily in the *Republic* and the *Laws*. Outside their context, it is impossible to provide a reasonable reading of *Parm.* 137ab — from Proclus' standpoint, at least.

¹³ Proclus, *Theol. Plat.* 5.88.2–4, a fragment of the passage quoted above.

2. Damascius on Parmenides' game

Similarly to Proclus, Damascius has also authored a commentary on the *Parmenides* of Plato. However, he pays significantly less attention to Parmenides' game. Firstly, he briefly mentions it:

The Being (τὸ ὄν) is a triad and one ultimate hypostasis (μία ὑπόστασις τελεία) [formed] of three element-like [entities]. And they are three triads, which emerge, as Parmenides hypothesises. And as far as he is neither playing, nor does a school exercise (μὴ παίζει ἢ μαθητικεύεται), so it is not in vain, when he changes three triads for one [triad], because this is exactly what we interpret as three hypostases. These subjects are what he [Proclus] explicates brilliantly. (*in Parm.* 69.1–6)

It is difficult to deny that Damascius here refers to the passage of *in Parm.* 1051.35–1052.9, which we have recently discussed. However, there is a significant difference. Proclus appreciates that Parmenides is not performing a school exercise but touches upon real beings; nevertheless, it can still be called a game, even if it is of the most serious kind. For Damascius, however, it is not a game at all — precisely because it is not a school exercise. In other words, Damascius drops almost all subtle reasoning of Proclus concerning the game of Parmenides. Moreover, Damascius does not mention any kind of games at all except for the game of Parmenides in the passage just quoted above and in the following one:

Well, we should investigate what is the One, which can be thought of using an apodictic [judgement]; and what is the not-one that appears to be self-related through the otherness. ... And thirdly, what is the Whole and its parts, as far as having parts is denied concerning the One. ... And fourthly, what is the other of what has been just denied and asserted again. Parmenides appears like he is playing (παίζοντι γὰρ ἔοικεν); and there were some [people], who thought he is just exercising his logical skill. Firstly, we should posit that the One is not conceived exclusively singular (as the simplest [entity]) and deprived of any other properties. At the same time, it is neither whole nor partial, and it is not a being different from itself [in any other mode], as [Parmenides] has explained. (*in Parm.* 186.9–18)

Similarly, here Parmenides is also said to be not just exercising and *therefore* not playing. It seems that Damascius does not appreciate Parmenides activity as a game at all. Noticeably, in *De principiis*, Damascius readily discusses almost every subtle detail of Plato's *Parmenides* but skips *Parm.* 136b8–137b3,¹⁴ i.e. the passage, where the “laborious game” is mentioned.

3. Simplicius on a philosopher's ethos

As far as among survived works of Simplicius, none comment upon Plato's dia-

¹⁴ According to indices in: Westerink, Combès 1991; Ahbel-Rappe 2010.

logues,¹⁵ there is no evidence of Simplicius' views on Plato's humour. However, in addition to voluminous commentaries to Aristotle's writings, Simplicius' commentary on the *Encheiridion* of Epictetus also reached modern readers revealing an extensive panorama of late Neoplatonic ethics.

What concerns our subject is Epictetus' passages from Chapter 33:

As for laughter, there shouldn't be much of it, or about many things; nor should it be unrestrained (*ἀνειμμένος*). ... Refrain from making other people laugh as well. It's a dangerous habit, that leads to the behaviour of ordinary people, and it is all that is needed to make those around you lower their respect for you.¹⁶

Simplicius provides a verbose commentary to both assertions. For the first (33.4), as follows:

After he has given the general precept for philosophers that they should remain in the same character, ... he checks the very great diversion due to the excessive joy which comes about through laughter. ... Laughter is like a sort of overflowing of excessive joy in the soul, which is why it happens when the breath is inflated, and produces a noise like gurgling. So it diverts the stable and gracious demeanour of the soul and body ... and spoils the constancy that comes from commensurateness. So for these reasons we should guard against laughing — especially laughing 'about many things.' No doubt there is some need for occasional laughter so that we don't remain completely unsmiling and produce a peevish character in ourselves, and seem uncouth and lacking in the graces to those around us. But there are few things worth laughing about. Someone who laughs about many things is clearly easily puffed up with excessive joy; hence you shouldn't feel this very often, or persist in laughing for a long time (that's what he means by 'much of it'); nor should you give yourself up to completely helpless laughter (I think that's what 'unrestrained' means here). Instead, your laughter should resemble a smile, producing a slight modification in the lips.¹⁷

For the second assertion of Epictetus on laughter (33.15), Simplicius adds:

Earlier he said that we should not laugh at 'many things' ourselves, or indulge in frequent or 'unrestrained' laughter; now he says that we should also not provoke laughter in others. He supplies the explanation for this when he says "It's a dangerous habit, that leads to the behaviour of ordinary people." For to say the kind of thing that provokes laughter in ordinary people means that what we say is completely acceptable to them and belongs to the condition of ordinary people. Thus they think that the person who provokes laughter is as much an ordinary person as they are, if not more, and even if they happened to hold him in respect before, 'this is all that is needed to

¹⁵ Note that in his exegesis, Simplicius turns to historical Parmenides instead of the *Parmenides* of Plato; see Baltussen 2008, 42–84, and especially page 70.

¹⁶ Epict. *Enchir.* 33.4, 15, Schenkl 1965; Brennan, Brittain 2002, 87–88.

¹⁷ Simplic. *in Epict.* 113.48–114.17, Dübner 1842; Brennan, Brittain 2002, 91.

make those around him slacken their respect for him.' (Even some people who seem to be sensible make jokes, because they want to look clever.)¹⁸

This ultimate Neoplatonic prudence here sounds much more in the Stoic vein rather than in Platonic — and that is not influenced entirely by the style of the commented writing, authored by a Stoic philosopher, but also caused by the philosophical ethos of late Athenian Neoplatonism as well. For instance, one can compare a passage of the *Philosophical history* of Damascius, where he slightly depreciates Salustius, his contemporary philosopher inclined to ridicule his opponents.¹⁹ The Syriac origin of Salustius appears to be some indulgence, as far as “the Syrians had a reputation for mockery” (Athassiadi 1999, 175n152).

Of course, the earnest character, especially for a young man, is praised by Plato in the *Republic* (e.g. 388e5–7 and elsewhere). However, there is another side of his ‘philosophical prudence,’ which provides a substantial role to the holy games (*Legg.* 803e1–3), which are appreciated by gods, who are playful themselves (*Crat.* 406c2–3). In contrast, neither Damascius nor his disciple Simplicius allows even a minor part of that playfulness and humour to be implied in Plato’s discourse they are commenting.

4. Olympiodorus on Socrates’ irony

Compared to Damascius and Simplicius, Olympiodorus appears more sensitive to Plato’s humour. However, he is still too far from that of Proclus. The most relevant for our subject work of Olympiodorus is his commentary on Plato’s *Gorgias*. On the one hand, Olympiodorus admits that Socrates’ irony really exists and discusses several relevant places. Here, we should state that Damascius has also mentioned Plato’s irony — but that happened just once (!) in the whole scope of his verbose commentary on the *Philebus*.²⁰ However, Olympiodorus discovers so few similar instances, that his modern scholars are compelled to speak of “a rare case of Ol[ympiodorus] not being blind to Socrates’ use of irony.”²¹ These ‘rare cases’ are as follows:

... Callicles, who constantly leads a childish and shameful life (παιδιώδη βίον), asks Chaerephon, who is an intermediate, “Is Socrates joking (παίζει) or is he in earnest (σπουδάζων) when he says these things?” And Chaerephon answers philosophically

¹⁸ Simpl. in *Epict.* 122.15–26; Brennan, Brittain 2002, 101.

¹⁹ Damasc. *Vita Isidori*, ap. Sudam, fr. 147, Zintzen 1967 = *Suda* IV 316, 4 = Athassiadi 1999, 174–175, fr. 66A.

²⁰ Damasc. in *Phileb.* 23; Westerink 1959, 15.

²¹ Jackson, Lycos, Tarrant 1998, 221n616.

and says "He seems to me to be unnaturally (ὑπερφυῶς) serious" — for the arguments are beyond nature (ὑπὲρ φύσιν) — "but Socrates is here, so ask him if he is earnest."²²

Here is a possible hint to the understanding of Plato's humour in a Proclean sense: what appears a joke or a game actually is a sign of something ultimately significant, related to the intellectual realm, or 'supernatural' as Olympiodorus tries to state here using a wordplay (a playful commentary to a play-related passage!).

Nevertheless, there are a few passages where Socrates' irony or playfulness are just acknowledged without a profound interpretation. For example:

... [Socrates] may be speaking ironically, but at least he is making an honest point. For he is teaching him not to be rough but mild. After Callicles had said "You are speaking ironically," Socrates says "No, by Zethus." He swears playfully by Zethus because Callicles had earlier referred to Zethus and Amphion when he spoke ironically of him, saying "You have a courageous soul" (485e).²³

"*Doing what a real man does*" (*Gorg.* 500c4–5): this refers to Callicles' earlier statement, "We must do what Gorgias recommends." So Socrates says "We must understand the life that we ought to follow, whether it is the one this man recommends or the one that philosophy promotes." His phrase "what a real man does (τὰ τοῦ ἀνδρός δὴ ταῦτα)" conveys a great ironical force through the word 'real (δὴ)'.²⁴

However, more often Olympiodorus depicts Socrates refusing to joke or ironise in favour of merely serious discourse:

"*And for the sake of the God of friendship (πρὸς Φιλίου), Callicles*" (*Gorg.* 500b5–6): [Socrates] refers him to the overseer of friendship, so that realising that God is the patron of friendship he will no longer play (μὴ πάλιν παίξῃ). For one who plays (ὁ παίζων) with a friend plays with God, the patron of [friendship].²⁵

"*Nor again take what I say that way, as making jokes (ὡς παίζοντος)*" (*Gorg.* 500b7–c1): for we must not, as he says, "treat serious matters with laughter (τοῖς γελοίοις)," especially now, where we need to inquire into how our life is to be lived, whether we should really [base it] on pleasure or not.²⁶

"*Well, now we're doing a ridiculous thing (πρᾶγμα γελοῖον), you and I in our discussion*" (517c4–5): [Socrates] includes himself in the joke (τῷ γελοίῳ) because of his modest

²² Olymp. *in Gorg.* 25.1.20–25.2.1, Westerink 1970; Jackson et al., 182.

²³ Olymp. *in Gorg.* 28.5; Jackson et al. 1998, 201.

²⁴ Olymp. *in Gorg.* 32.13; Jackson et al. 1998, 221. Note that the sole 'ironical' passage of Damascius' commentary on the *Philebus* mentioned above also deals with a particle δὴ, which is said to add an ironical sense to the discussed passage (*in Phileb.* 23).

²⁵ Olymp. *in Gorg.* 32.11; Jackson et al. 1998, 221.

²⁶ Olymp. *in Gorg.* 32.12; Jackson et al. 1998, 221.

character, or because he wishes to show that if a student behaves ridiculously (καταγελάστως) the teacher is also insulted for it (ὕβριζεται).²⁷

In the commentary to Plato's *Alcibiades*, Olympiodorus states that Plato “disassociated himself from Socratic irony,”²⁸ and elsewhere he insists on the necessity to pass from irony, joking, and playing games to seriousness, which is necessary for philosophical reasoning and is an ethical virtue in general. For Olympiodorus, playing games is chiefly a childish activity;²⁹ and once he utters a real aphorism: “truth is always serious and never plays.”³⁰

Finally, when Socrates appears joking or ironising, he may actually be ultimately serious despite the first superficial impression:

... Callicles thought that [Socrates] spoke in play (παίζων λέγει). For instance he asked Chaerephon “Is Socrates speaking seriously or in play (σπουδάζων ... ἢ παίζων)?” Not only is Socrates not playing when he declares this, but he is in fact hunting for a way to demonstrate these conclusions with threads of adamant.³¹

In most cases, Olympiodorus apprehends Socrates' irony, jokes and playfulness primarily as an awkward peculiarity of his character and his mode of philosophising, which was already alien to Plato, not to say about Neoplatonists. Rarely, Olympiodorus finds Socrates' irony useful from the pedagogical standpoint of philosophical propaedeutic. But almost no significant Platonic discourse can be related to games. We have met just the only exclusion above — in the discussion of “arguments beyond nature,” where Olympiodorus enters a wordplay himself. It is difficult to judge whether he realised that his own interpretation was based on a pun.

Nevertheless, the exegetics of Olympiodorus is much more sensitive to Platonic humour than that of Damascius and Simplicius. Despite his underestimation of the philosophical significance of games and playfulness, Olympiodorus provides probably the most extensive list of evidence of what appeared ludicrous or playful to Neoplatonic readers of Plato. None of his predecessors mentioned Socrates' irony so many times. However, the number of such instances is still times less than what modern readers recognised as humour-related.

²⁷ Olymp. *in Gorg.* 42.3; Jackson et al. 1998, 274.

²⁸ Olymp. *in Alcib.* 2.150, Westerink 1956; Griffin 2015, 76.

²⁹ “Children are accustomed to play (τὰ γὰρ παιδία εἰώθασι παίζεσθαι),” while adults should not be treated as children, and therefore they do not play — Olymp. *in Gorg.* 32.6; Jackson et al. 1998, 220.

³⁰ ἀλήθεια ἀεὶ σπουδάζει καὶ οὐδέποτε παίζει — Olymp. *in Gorg.* 25.3.21; Jackson et al. 1998, 184.

³¹ Olymp. *in Gorg.* 35.14; Jackson et al. 1998, 236.

5. Conclusions

On the way from Proclus to Olympiodorus, there is a noticeable shift in the understanding of games, jokes, irony and laughter of Plato's characters. For Proclus, laughter pertains to gods (however, of the lower level), and some games may be divine and excite human souls to the contemplation of the intelligible. On the other hand, Proclus clearly distinguishes sober "old men's games" from childish amusements that have no philosophical value. Moreover, games and arts vary from the standpoint of their relation to the intelligible realm of forms, and consequently, their pedagogical potential.

Damascius and Simplicius touch upon humour-related passages of Plato much rarer. Moreover, it seems plausible that sometimes they omitted such places intentionally. Both Damascius and Simplicius appreciate a sober and solemn philosophical ethos; they are much closer to the asceticism of Stoics rather than to the religious perspective of "holy games" in Plato's *Republic* and *Laws*.

Olympiodorus, on the one hand, adheres to the same rigoristic ethics as Damascius and Simplicius. He does not appreciate Plato's humour as a means of philosophy. On the other hand, however, he does not excuse himself for overlooking multiple instances of Socratic humour. As a fair researcher and interpreter, he feels obliged to explain every such instance despite his own rejection of irony. Sometimes he appears as perspicacious as Proclus, although we cannot judge whether Olympiodorus' insights were conscious or not.

The changing attitude to humour and playfulness reflects the general shift to ascetic ethics both in pagan Neoplatonic and Greek Christian traditions during the fourth to seventh centuries AD. Simultaneously, the theurgic excitement of Iamblichus and Proclus was being gradually supplanted by a more rational and analytical approach of Damascius and his successors. Naturally, the symbolic reading of Socrates' irony and Plato's games was declining as well.

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