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Toys as Mimetic Objects. A Problem from Plato's Laws

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Abstract. What is a toy? As objects of play, toys seem to be inextricably bound up with mimesis: a child plays 'make believe', for example, with a doll or toy cart. But as I will show, Plato has a very different conception of toys from the modern one which tends to conceive of play as essentially mimetic. Toys do not derive their pleasure from being mimetic objects; rather, they are essentially pleasure objects and as such only incidentally mirror the objects of a 'serious' or 'real' world.

Key words. Toys, Plato, Paidia, Mimesis, Play.

Antiquity was not so flooded with toys as present-day industrial and post-industrial societies are. But they had their fair share: balls, dolls, knuckle-bones, terracotta figurines, toy carts, rattles and more are found in the archaeological record, and images of children playing with toys appear frequently in artistic depictions, especially on classical Greek vases¹. One even hears about more exotic toys that did not seem to survive for archaeologists, for example, the mechanical pigeon of a certain Archytas, which could fly by some «current of air» within it, perhaps by steam power². It was made of wood, Gellius says, which, as for so many toys, gave it slim chances for archaeological survival, if it ever existed. Many of these toys were beloved objects: they were buried with children who died young, they were given as presents to children on festival days, and they even some-

¹ For general discussions of toys in antiquity, cf. Deubner (1930), Schmidt (1971), Mann (1975), Mühlbauer, Miller (1988), André *et al.* (1991), Shumka (1993), Fittà (1998), Coulon (2003); for dolls, Elderkin (1930), Janssen (1996), Johnston (2003/2004), Dolansky (2012); for terracotta figurines, Preston (1975). For artistic depictions of play on vases see especially Beck (1975).

² Aulus Gellius, *Attic Nights* 10.12. Huffman (2005): 571-579 for discussion. Some take the *thauma* or «plaything» of the gods (*Laws* 1.644c-645c) as a mechanized or wind-up toy: cf. Frede (2010): 116-120 and Schöpsdau (1994): 237 for discussion.

times served cultic purposes, perhaps as tokens for the good life to come³.

But both for antiquity and for today, one wishes to know: what exactly is a toy? The more one thinks about them, the stranger they become since children can and do play with anything that lies at hand (shoes, boxes, paper, and so forth), a fact which makes toys seem rather superfluous. Children do not exactly «use» toys, nor do they exactly «play» with them, at least, not in the same way that they play with non-toy objects like shoes, boxes, and paper⁴. Instead, the toy seems to be some third object lodged between the acts of playing and using. In what follows, I will consider one extended passage from Plato's *Laws* which describes toys as *mimemata*, mimetic objects, and ask what it is about these toys that makes them *mimemata* or, as Plato says, less than «real»⁵. Toys are not mimetic, I will argue, because children engage with them in a mimetic way, for example, playing «make believe» with carts and dolls. Rather they are mimetic by virtue of being pleasure objects: only through a toy's essential relationship to pleasure does it become mimetic of a more «serious» world. Mimesis itself meanwhile appears to have no necessary connection to pleasure at all.

THE PROBLEM PASSAGE

Here is the passage from Plato's *Laws*, usually considered his final work. As in the *Republic*,

³ For toys buried with children, cf. Rühfel (1984): 134-137 (some adults too are buried with boardgames and dice: cf. Vermeule [1979]: 77-82, Whittaker [2005]); for presents on festival days, cf. Aristoph. *Clouds* 861; for cultic purposes, Mühlbauer, Miller (1988), Levianiouk (2007); for depictions of eternal play in the afterlife, cf. Pindar *Threnoi* fr. 129 Maehler, Pausanias 10.30.

⁴ I.e., in «playing» with toys one is «using» them precisely as they are meant to be used; with non-toy objects «play» begins where proper «use» stops (e.g., a shoe becomes a telephone, a box becomes a castle, etc.).

⁵ In Greek, *mimesis* is the creating of *mimemata* (plural of *mimema*), much as poetry (*poesis*) is the creating of poems (*poemata*, plural of *poiema*). One may think of a *mimema* as a concrete instantiation of any act of *mimesis*.

the education of citizens is central to forming the planned city, but, in the *Laws*, a stronger focus is given to early education, especially that central activity of childhood, play (1.643b-d)⁶. The star character of the *Laws*, the Athenian, says to his travel companions:

I think that everyone on the course to becoming a good man ought to practice right from childhood this very thing: namely, to play and to engage seriously with those parts of the real world fitting to each. That is, someone about to become a good farmer or a builder ought to play something from a builder's education, a farmer too. And the caretaker of each of these children ought to provide them with little tools, mimemata of real ones. And in this way they ought to learn ahead of time as much as they ought to have learned, i.e., a builder to measure or estimate and a warrior to play at being a knight or do some other such thing, and to try, through their play, to turn the pleasures and desires of the children in that direction which they should follow to reach their end⁷.

Here, as in the *Republic*, the speaker is interested in starting the education of citizenship early: in the imagined scenario⁸, caretakers need to

⁶ For the role of play in the *Laws*, see Jouët-Pastré (2006): 63-66 for this passage; for comparative treatment of the *Republic's* Kallipolis and the *Laws's* Magnesia, see Prauscello (2014): 21-101.

⁷ λέγω δὴ, καὶ φημι τὸν ὀτιοῦν ἀγαθὸν ἄνδρα μέλλοντα ἔσεσθαι τοῦτο αὐτὸ ἐκ παίδων εὐθύς μελετᾶν δεῖν, παίζοντά τε καὶ σπουδάζοντα ἐν τοῖς τοῦ πράγματος ἐκάστοις προσήκουσιν. οἷον τὸν μέλλοντα ἀγαθὸν ἔσεσθαι γεωργὸν ἢ τινα οἰκοδόμον τι τῶν παιδείων οἰκοδομημάτων παίζειν χρή, τὸν δ' αὖ γεωργοῦντα, καὶ ὄργανα ἐκατέρω σμικρά, τῶν ἀληθινῶν μιμήματα, παρασκευάζειν τὸν τρέφοντα αὐτῶν ἐκάτερον, καὶ δὴ καὶ τῶν μαθημάτων ὅσα ἀναγκαῖα προμεμαθηκέναι προμανθάνειν, οἷον τέκτονα μετρεῖν ἢ σταθμᾶσθαι καὶ πολεμικὸν ἵππευεῖν παίζοντα ἢ τι τῶν τοιοῦτων ἄλλο ποιοῦντα, καὶ πειρᾶσθαι διὰ τῶν παιδιῶν ἐκεῖσε τρέπειν τὰς ἡδονὰς καὶ ἐπιθυμίας τῶν παίδων, οἳ ἀφικομένους αὐτοὺς δεῖ τέλος ἔχειν.

⁸ As Rankin (1958): 65 notes the passage is «is illustrative rather than legislative»; i.e., the real education the Athenian is interested in to come (643e) and the present passage is meant as an analogy to introduce it. Cf. Frede (2010): 115, Kurke (2013): 128-129.

manipulate children's natural inclinations to play in such a way that prepares them for their future roles as farmers, builders, cavalry officers, and so forth. The trick is to give them the proper toys, he says, which he calls «small tools (*smikra organa*)» or, in apposition, *mimemata* of real tools. For the builder one might imagine a hammer or measuring instrument, for the farmer a shovel or hoe, for the cavalry officer a hobby horse, and so forth.

What makes these little hammers and shovels *mimemata*, as opposed to real hammers and shovels? For one, they are smaller. Presumably, but not necessarily⁹, they are smaller to scale: a full-size shovel would be too heavy for the child to wield, a full-size measuring stick would not allow the child the right agility for learning how to measure carefully, and so forth. But when one turns to Plato's usage of the term *mimema* elsewhere, it becomes clear that smallness really has nothing to do with these little objects' status as *mimemata*. Pictures are *mimemata*, words are *mimemata*, songs are *mimemata*, anything that stands in some relationship to reality but is itself to be distinguished from that reality: these are *mimemata*¹⁰. This would suggest that the smallness of these objects only incidentally make them feel less real, if one indeed feels this. It is not simply that these objects are small, but that by virtue of being small, they connote toys and playthings, and thus *mimemata* of real objects¹¹.

The little shovels are not «real» shovels, then, but «representations» of shovels, or one might say «pretend» shovels. They are meant to be played with, not used in any proper sense, and thus, for the Athenian, they are *mimemata*. But if this is so, it should be immediately noticed how different these *mimemata* are from the more typical examples of *mimemata* that Plato cites, like pictures,

stories, and songs. One can view a picture, but one cannot enter it, or taste or touch the objects depicted there. If a landscape, for example, is depicted, most of the senses are barred from experiencing it, to say nothing of that immediate feeling of moving through time and space. But with the little toy *mimemata* there are often no such barriers, and the difference between actually digging with a shovel and playing with a shovel is comparatively imperceptible. The shovel is still the shovel, the dirt is still the dirt – all the inputs of the five senses in fact are exactly the same – yet it is only a *mimema* of a shovel, and thus only representative of the act of shoveling, not the real thing.

This play-barrier is often imperceptible but clearly a barrier is perceived or the Athenian would not have called these objects *mimemata* in the first place. Usually the way that such play is described by modern theorists is something like an energetic activity practiced in a demarcated space where real-life consequences are suspended¹². But the Athenian's conception of play is strikingly different: rather than focusing on barriers and removes from reality – which tends to dominate Plato's *mimesis* discussions – the Athenian almost exclusively focuses on pleasure (*hedone*) as the defining characteristic of play¹³. The primary goal in these play activities is not that the children learn and practice their future work as farmers and builders – these are mere externalities – but that their pleasures (*hedonas*) and desires-for-pleasures (*epithumias*) be directed

⁹ E.g., toy carts which are often considerably smaller than scale itself would demand: for depictions, see Beck (1975): 277-281.

¹⁰ For words as *mimemata* cf. Pl. *Crat.* 423b, 430a, *Soph.* 234b; for pictures Pl. *Crat.* 430b, *Soph.* 235e, *Pol.* 300c, 306d; for songs, *Laws* 668b.

¹¹ The verb «play (*paizo*)» appears three times in the passage (1.643bcd).

¹² Cf. Groos (1899) for the influential play-as-practice theory, with Burghardt (2005): 3-43 for survey of ethological positions; Huizinga (1980 [1938]): 10-14 for the «magic circle» (for the Sanskrit term: 57); Caillois (2001 [1958]), who often cites Groos, for play as «separate» and «circumscribed» (9); Spariosu (1982): 19 claims Plato conflates play with *mimesis*, thereby impacting «the next two thousand years», but overlooks key passages like n. 16 below which shows this not to be the case (nor does *ablabe* mean «pastime», 18); Sonderegger (2000): 12-14 uses the «Spielbegriff» to demonstrate the autonomy of art, noting influence from Huizinga and Caillois for this concept (8).

¹³ *Rep.* 10.596de for the infamous mirror analogy with Halliwell (2002): 133-47 for its defense.

toward those activities of their future adult lives. The caretaker, he says, should try, via the children's play, to turn their pleasures and desires' in a certain direction.

Now, it is easy for a modern reader to import notions like «imagination» or «make believe» into such ancient contexts of play, but there is little reason to assume that these children are «pretending» to shovel, «imagining» a «real» shovel, or involving themselves in some game of «make believe»¹⁴. Instead the distinction for the Athenian seems to be that the children engage in such shoveling for the sake of pleasure alone, and this criterion is what distinguishes play-shoveling from «real» shoveling. Handling the shovel is pleasurable and enjoyable in itself, and nothing more than this pleasurable engagement is required for the Athenian's act of «playing». There is a good deal of evidence to support this reading: Plato not only frequently pairs «pleasure» and «play» together as if they were all but synonymous¹⁵, but also, in his later works, explicitly uses «play» as a positive category to encompass both mimetic arts (e.g., paintings, poetry) and non-mimetic arts (e.g., decorations, designs)¹⁶. This would suggest that play is not essentially mimetic for Plato; instead, as he explicitly claims else-

where, what is essential about play is that it is for «pleasure alone»¹⁷.

This raises a new sort of problem for *mimesis*. The traditional problem of *mimesis* has tended to be: how does one move from *mimesis* to pleasure? That is, why is it pleasurable, for example, to look at a painting of a farmhouse or watch a dramatic depiction of a matricide? The reason, according to Aristotle, is because «we infer that this is that» when engaging with a *mimesis*, and this learning is pleasurable¹⁸. But the new problem the Athenian poses reverses the question¹⁹: not «how does one move from *mimesis* to pleasure?» but «how does one move from pleasure to *mimesis*?». More precisely: is it possible to explain something as complex as *mimesis* by means of pleasure alone?

It may help to consider the Athenian's child again: the child is provided a small shovel and it engages in some sort of shoveling for no other reason than that shoveling's immediate pleasure²⁰. The desires-for-pleasure guiding this behavior – *epithumiai* in Greek – are immediate, not long term. As Henrik Lorenz has argued in his study of *epithumia*, there is no means-end reasoning involved with these irrational desires (*epithumiai*), and it is primarily in this sense that the *epithumiai* are said to be «irrational»²¹. A child sees a shiny object and grabs it for its immediate pleasure, not

¹⁴ The word *phantasia* – which leads to the Latin *imaginatio*, which leads to the English «imagination» – did not mean «imagination» at all for Plato and Aristotle. There was no such concept and so one would do well to avoid it in descriptions of ancient play (cf. Rankin [1958]: 64: «“Imagination” is probably too fluid and modern a word to be useful in discussing this passage [Laws 643]). For the meaning of *phantasia* see especially Nussbaum (1978): 221-269, Caston (1996).

¹⁵ Cf. *Timaeus* 26bc («pleasure and play», ἡδονῆς καὶ παιδιᾶς), *Critias* 115b («for the sake of pleasure and play», παιδιᾶς τε ὅς ἔνεκα ἡδονῆς), *Laws* 1.635bc («pleasures and plays», ἡδονῶν καὶ παιδιῶν), 819b («both play and pleasure», παιδιᾶς τε καὶ ἡδονῆς).

¹⁶ Cf. *Sophist* 234b, *Statesman* 288c; Gundert (1965): 210 noted this well: «Tatsächlich erscheint bei Platon später die Paidia ausdrücklich als das umfassende Genus, dem auch die Mimesis mit ihren Unterarten als Species angehört (Soph. 234b; Pol. 288c; vgl. N. X 889cd und Epin 975p)».

¹⁷ Cf. *Statesman* 288c, where the category «plaything» (*paigion*), which encompasses both mimetic and non-mimetic art forms, is defined as «for our pleasures alone» (πρὸς τὰς ἡδονὰς μόνον ἡμῶν); cf. *Laws* 2.667e.

¹⁸ *Poetics* 4.1448b15-17.

¹⁹ Technically, of course, Aristotle is the one doing the reversing. For Aristotle's rejection of play as the activity of the good life, see *Nic. Eth.* 10.6, 1176b9-28 and *Politics* 8.5, 1339b31-40 with Kidd (2016).

²⁰ This is not only a typical description of children – namely, creatures lacking reason who can do little else than follow their desires-for-pleasure (*epithumiai*; see, e.g., Arist. *Nic. Eth.* 3.12, 1119b5-7) – but a likely definition of Greek «play». The Greek word for «play», *paizo*, is rooted in the word *pais* «child», as if by behaving like a child, that is, by following one's irrational desires for immediate pleasure, one is engaging in the act of «playing», *paizo*.

²¹ Lorenz (2006): 11, 32-34.

as a means to some future good or deferred long-term pleasure²². Similarly, one might say that play-shoveling or pleasure-shoveling is not engaged in for the sake of some future goal – for example, a ditch for the garden – but rather because of its immediate pleasure: it is pleasurable to handle the shovel and pleasurable to be engaging in this act of quasi-shoveling. To *actually* dig a ditch, however, appears to require something more than that draw of immediate pleasure. Whether this is because the bulk of ditch-digging is actually a painful chore or because such activities require careful planning, actual goal-oriented digging would seem to compel the digger to endure whatever present pains are at hand (and to defer whatever pleasures are beckoning from elsewhere) for the sake of that future goal.

Thus, what emerges side by side are two similar, yet markedly different activities: actual, «serious» digging, on the one hand, and pleasurable, «play» digging, on the other hand. In play-digging the child follows its pleasure, digging now here, now there, filling in the hole it just dug, and so forth. Most importantly of all, the child quits digging whenever the digging stops being immediately pleasurable. Actual digging, on the other hand, defers that immediate pleasure for some future goal (e.g., the ditch), and is no more connected to pleasure than the «serious» look on the digger's face²³.

²² This is why children are so easy to deceive (cf. Plato, *Gorg.* 464de, 499c, 521e; *Rep.* 3,409a, 10.598c; *Soph.* 234b): they cannot distinguish the immediate pleasure from the long-term good, most famously in the debate between the doctor and the pastry chef at *Gorg.* 521e-522a.

²³ There is no more hackneyed observation in play studies than that «play can be serious» (cf. Huizinga [1949]: 5: «Some play can be very serious indeed»; Freud [1959]: 174: «On the contrary, [the child] takes his play very seriously»; Gadamer [1960]: 97: «Wichtiger ist, daß im Spielen selbst ein eigener, ja, ein heiliger Ernst gelegen ist»; Jouët-Pastré [2006]: 13: «Que le jeu et le sérieux de la recherche philosophique ne soient pas toujours antinomiques chez Platon n'a donc pas été ignoré.») The observation amounts to the fact that much play is goal-oriented (e.g., building a sand castle; the Greek word for «serious»

If this is what the Athenian has in mind regarding the *epithumetic* pleasure of play, a certain *mimesis* appears to emerge even though no *mimesis* is intended. Although the child is not intentionally imitating or representing «real» shoveling, its action nevertheless stands in some relationship to «real» shoveling, and so – especially from the adult perspective – can be claimed as a *mimesis* of real shoveling. Similarly, the objects involved in these two actions cannot help but mirror each other: in «real» shoveling, where the action is engaged in for the sake of some deferred end, the shovel becomes an object in service of that end: it is a tool to be used. In play-shoveling, where the action itself is immediately pleasurable, the shovel becomes a pleasure-object, which is to say, a toy. Although these two objects and two acts look almost exactly alike – the toy shovel looks like a real shovel, only smaller, and real shoveling is all but indistinguishable from play shoveling – to the Athenian they involve different intentions, different experiences, and completely different psychological frameworks lying behind those intentions and experiences. The play shovel is primarily an object of pleasure and desire-for-that-pleasure (*epithumia*), whereas the real shovel, one might say, even it is a small one, is simply a shovel, without any special purchase on pleasure at all.

THE PROBLEM WITH THE PASSAGE

In many ways, the Athenian's account is an improvement upon a number of modern accounts of play. There is no reason to envision this child's activity as «pretending» to shovel, or the shovel being a «prop» which sparks the image of a «real» shovel in the child's mind, as it engages in some game of «make believe» shoveling²⁴. Plato's Athe-

spoudaios in fact derives from a «hurrying» or «hastening» (>*spseudō*) after some goal). But, to steal a line from Thrasymachus («you are a sycophant, Socrates...», *Rep.* 1.340d), this is to study «play» inasmuch as it is «serious» not inasmuch as it is «play».

²⁴ See, e.g. Walton's (1990): 11-69 influential descriptions of «make believe».

nian requires none of this and instead moves to what is, in some ways, a more plausible description: the child is simply handling the shovel for pleasure, digging for pleasure, and not necessarily «imagining» anything²⁵.

Yet such an account of play's relationship to *mimesis* is not without its own pitfalls and so it is worth returning to the passage. The Athenian mentions not just farmers and builders but «a future warrior» who is «to play at being a knight or do some other such thing». What does the Athenian have in mind here for the future knight's games? One passage often adduced comes from Plutarch's biography of the Spartan King Agesilaus, where he relates an anecdote about this king's love of play. The anecdote can be traced back at least as far as the first century BCE to a lost work entitled *On Play and Seriousness* by a tutor of the future emperor Augustus, Athenodorus of Tarsus²⁶. Here is the story (Ag. 25): «Agesilaus was also exceedingly a lover of children, and they say about him, of his play, that he was one day playing with little children at home, and rode around on a stick as if it were a horse. But then he was seen doing this by one of his friends, so he begged him not to tell anyone... until he became a father of children himself»²⁷.

The important object of this passage is the *kalamos* or stick that Agesilaus in his play was riding around on as if it were a horse. If this stick is a *mimema* of a horse at the moment of riding it, is it the same sort of *mimema* that Plato's little shovel was? Or are these two objects of play somehow

different? Plato's Athenian, I think would provide a psychological framework of Agesilaus in his play like the following: Agesilaus is not engaging with this stick in the way that a rational person seriously engaging in the world would. If one engages with the stick in a «serious» way, one either finds it useful for something else (for example, a stake for the garden, as the dictionary suggests for the word *kalamos*), or alternatively one finds it useless and so disposes of it altogether. In play, or in adopting the psychic state of the child (*pais* being the root of *paizein*), Agesilaus temporarily removes that sort of means-ends reasoning and simply follows his *epithumetic* desire, which is to say his desire for pleasure, so fundamental to the perceived actions of children. The object, the stick, somehow in and of itself becomes an object of pleasure: there is no end beyond it that one is trying to reach. One simply wants to handle the stick for its own sake, just like the little shovels above.

But if this is so, it can immediately be seen that something separates this stick from the other toys of the Athenian since the desire surrounding this stick is clearly more complicated. While the *epithumiai* surrounding the little shovel seemed to say «it is pleasurable to handle this shovel, so let's handle the shovel» the *epithumiai* surrounding the stick seem to say «it is pleasurable to handle this stick *as if it were a horse*, so let's handle it *as if it were a horse*». The pleasure that arises from the horse *mimesis* seems to lie at least partially in bridging that great distance between the stick and the horse, in so effortlessly overcoming the obvious fact that the stick is so un-horselike. As so often occurs in such play, the pleasure seems to arise from misusing the stick: it is not a garden-stake or kindling or filler for the fence, it is a horse to ride.

It would thus appear impossible to describe this pleasure as arising from any other source than *mimesis*. The Athenian's child – to say nothing of Agesilaus – seems to be «imagining» or playing «make believe» that it is a real knight, and this imagining is the essence of its play. No longer is the player moving from pleasure to *mimesis*, but once again moving more traditionally from *mime-*

²⁵ See above n. 14 on imagination. The younger the child is, the more difficult it is to speak of play as *mimesis* or «make believe»: what does an infant know of the world it is allegedly imitating? If, ethologically speaking, a child learns about the world through play, one is faced with the paradox of a child learning about the world by imitating that which it has already learned.

²⁶ See Huffman (2005): 219, Hense (1907), for discussion.

²⁷ ἦν δὲ καὶ φιλότεκνος διαφερόντως ὁ Ἀγησίλαος, καὶ περὶ ἐκείνου τὸ τῆς παιδείας λέγουσιν, ὅτι μικροῖς τοῖς παιδίοις οὖσι κάλαμον περιβεβηκῶς ὥσπερ ἵππον οἴκοι συνέπαιζεν, ὄφθεις δ' ὑπὸ τίνος τῶν φίλων παρεκάλει μηδενὶ φράσαι, πρὶν ἂν καὶ αὐτὸς πατὴρ παίδων γένηται.

sis to pleasure. The toy is no longer a pleasure-object and, by virtue of this, an imitation of a «real» object, but is instead primarily an imitation of a «real» object (a horse) and, by virtue of this, an object of pleasure. It would be a messy business simply to posit some forms of play as mimetic and other forms as not without any unifying vision regarding its pleasures. But worse still, one would have to concede side-by-side unintentional *mimesis* (e.g., the shoveling), where *mimesis* is not the source of pleasure, with intentional *mimesis* (the horse-stick game) where *mimesis* is the pleasure source.

The Athenian seems to have something else in mind. Elsewhere in the *Laws*, he locates the genesis of play not in some desire for imitation, but in a restless inability to keep still, a pleasurable movement of youth²⁸. If anything, *mimesis* would seem to imprint itself from the outside upon these pleasurable activities²⁹. But what then to do with the horse-stick game? Can it really be said that the children actually believe the stick to be a horse in the same way that they believe the toy-shovel to be a shovel? The position would have to claim that in the world of pleasure/play they do: that is, they do not «seriously» believe the stick is a horse, but that word «seriously» bears the explanatory burden. So long as it is pleasurable to believe the stick is a horse, they do, but when one must commit oneself to a belief, the game is up, and the stick must become again what one has learned it to be. One might think of such play in terms of jokes (in Greek the question «are you joking?» becomes «are you playing?», «*paizeis*»): if I claimed in a joke that a stick was a horse («let me introduce you to my noble steed...»), I am not imitating a man with a horse, but believing and asking you to believe, *so long as it is pleasurable*, that I am a man with a horse. This act of pleasure-

believing or play-believing is not unlike the play-shoveling described above: the belief is not a long-term commitment like the ditch but a thing of momentary pleasure. Whatever one makes of this explanation, it should be noted that the alternative description, that is, describing the horse-game in terms of *mimesis*, faces at least one problem: in order to ride a play-horse one must have a mental image of «real» horse-riding and imitate that, but isn't that also what one does when one «really» rides a horse³⁰?

The Athenian of the *Laws* thus appears to be offering a new and stimulating vision of the relationship between play and *mimesis*, one very different from the *mimesis* of his student, which has become the *mimesis* of tradition. Plato's Athenian raises the problem of how one moves from pleasure to *mimesis*, not how one moves from *mimesis* to pleasure. Yet, the nature of a «toy» still eludes since, as has been seen, in the Athenian's account anything can be made into an object of pleasure once one engages with it in that pleasure-mode, play (*paidia*). It is thus worth returning to the passage a final time. When the adult caretaker provides the children with certain toys it is to «direct their pleasures and desires-for-pleasures» in a certain direction. Although in play it is true that anything can become an object of pleasure, what seems to make a «toy» a «toy» here is not its ability to give pleasure but its ability to «direct (*trephein*)». The adult of this passage has a grasp on reality³¹ that the child does not, and for this reason is able to see the child's activities as mimetic when the child may not³². Knowing what real farming

²⁸ *Laws* 2.653de; cf. 2.657c, 673d. Cf. Schöpsdau (1994): ad loc., Jouët-Pastré (2006): 69-74, Prauscello (2014): 140-149.

²⁹ This is the ultimate role of education (*paideia*) in the *Laws*: to manipulate citizens' play in such a way that it is mimetic of «good» actions (cf. 1.643b-44b, 2.653a-56a, 667b-668b).

³⁰ Unlike the English «imagination» the Greek *phantasia* is involved in both acts; see above n. 14.

³¹ «Reality» here not need mean anything more than the adult's construct of reality.

³² Caution is needed when interpreting Plato and Aristotle's recommendations that play be mimetic of future «serious» activities (cf. Pl. *Laws* 1.643b, Arist. *Pol.* 7.17, 1336a32-4). For a post-Darwinian reader, this can naturally be understood to imply that all play is mimetic (for ethological theories of play as practice see above n. 12). For a pre-Darwinian observer this is not so obvious. The observation instead seems to be that children's play has

and real war is, the adult discerns not only what resembles it but also what mimetic activities would be useful for those future serious ones. Although shoveling the dirt is inherently pleasurable in play, the adult clarifies that this is an «imitation» of real farm work; although riding the stick around is inherently pleasurable, the adult clarifies that this is an «imitation» of being a knight. Children may begin, like adults, to describe their play as *mimesis*, but this is an added – and, as far as the pleasure is concerned, unnecessary – orientation, which «turns» the child's eyes toward the «real world». The Athenian's explanation of toys, then, is not that they are sources of pleasure, but ones which direct the pleasures that are brought to them. When players mistake their play for *mimesis*, they take one step closer to the real world, or at least the world of the one who gives them the toys.

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the potential to be mimetic of future «serious» activities when properly manipulated by adult educators.

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