The Well-Being of Play in Academia

Inquiring the concept of agalma in Plato's dialogues

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A B S T R A C T

This article examines the well from which good learning, teaching, and research originate. It investigates how to perform these three aspects of academic practice well and to do it in a playful manner. Instead of repeating existing knowledge and scientific methods punctiliously, the playful academic experiences and presents knowledge in new or alternative ways. Playfulness more often results in discoveries and inventions that are otherwise unthinkable.

Through an analysis of a selection of Plato's myths, allegories, and imagery, the article demonstrates how very complicated subject matters can be illustrated in a playful, synecdochic form, hereby making the unfathomable easier to approach and understand.

Examining Plato's concept of 'agalma' – the beautiful ornament of wisdom – the article discusses how we can see academia as a jewellery box, or as a plaything. Agalma allows us to see learning, teaching, and research as an adventurous journey or as a playful labyrinth leading into all dimensions of being.

Prelude

Play is a symbol of the world, Eugen Fink states in *The Oasis of Happiness* he writes that 'Being in its totality functions like play' (1968, p. 29). Likewise, all faculties of academia deal with the world, each in their own way. Obviously then, the best way to learn, teach, and do research would be to do it in a playful manner.

This article invites you – the reader – on a journey in order to seek out what it means to play, academically. If we follow Fink's statement, play leads to well-being and happiness. Play can be characterised as an oasis, a source, an inexhaustible well, from which the playful academic obtains inspiration, knowledge, and insight. As you will discover on this journey the well-being of play is not always pleasant. The (trans)formation that results from playful learning, teaching, and research is often accompanied by a feeling of frustration and perplexity, since you need to transgress the security and restraints of everyday academic practices. Play is not a specific method. There is no pre-recorded map. Rather, it is an attitude. That is why the meanings of the concepts applied in this article – or the way they appear – are not static. They differ according to context, level, or dimension. The article will try to trick and tease you. But as a playful academic you always tease and get teased. Sometimes you get lost when trying to make sense of the world around you. Other times you find paths that lead to mental or physical landscapes you never saw or imagined before, or make you understand things you are familiar with in new ways.

Concepts and guidelines for reading the article

It is tempting promptly to define play as openness and movement, freed from the restraints of rules. As we are told by play theorist Roger Caillois, play is a 'free and voluntary activity, a source of joy and amusement' (2001, p. 6). The concept of play, though, is much too complex and paradoxical to be reduced to one-sided definitions. Thus Caillois divides play into two poles. One pole is rule-bound games (ludus); the other is anarchic playing (paidia). Dan Dixon (2009, p. 7) compares Caillois' two poles with the distinction between the Apollonian and the Dionysian. The Dionysian is ecstatic intoxication; sensuous play without any sense of form or boundary. The Apollonian is visually oriented; rule bound, and structures the world by using intellect and imagination. The Dionysian is the mode of pure experience without an apparent purpose, whereas the Apollonian is the ludic creator and presenter of knowledge.

Caillois makes a further division into four types of play that can be placed on a continuum between ludus and paidia. *Agon* is combat and competitive games. *Alea* concerns lotteries and chance. *Mimicry* relates to acting, toys, and carnival. And *ilinx* is spasms, shock, and vertigo. Perhaps these four types of play should rather be regarded as *aspects* of play, all embedded in *any* kind of play or game, and activated in different measures and variations. Imagine these aspects as the buttons on your stereo where you can adjust the intensity of agon, alea,

mimicry, and ilinx. In a game of chess, for instance, you sometimes feel your heart beating stronger because of an unexpected move made by your opponent; or the joy and excitement of being in good luck. The chess board is like a stage on which every chess piece has its own character. And the way you play is not just defined by the rules. It also reveals your choreography and strategy of acting offensively, defensively, or capriciously.

The article follows Fink's attempt to define *the meaning of existence through play*. This, he calls 'the speculative concept of play'. Fink explains: 'Speculation is the characterization of the essence of Being by means of the *example of one type of Being*; it is a conceptual formula for the world deriving from a part of the world used as a model for the whole' (1968, p. 29).

What Fink calls symbol – or speculation – we will here characterise as *synecdoche*. Synecdoche is a type of metonymy in which a part is taken for the whole, or vice versa. Or according to Schofer and Rice, synecdoche is 'the container for the contained' (1977, p. 141). A central synecdoche in the article is the concept of *agalma*, which Johan Huizinga links to play in ritual ceremonies in archaic culture – also termed *sacred play* (1950 p. 167). Etymologically, agalma derives from a verbal root with a diverse compound of meanings. It is joy, exultation, or adornment. It is a toy, a votive gift, or the statue of a god. Like the *container for the contained* agalma holds the meaning of both jewel and jewellery box. Agalma can be found in any kind of play, as a structure and as a pathway. It is an ornament as a whole, plus the mosaic multitude of decorative parts, and the patterns that link the ornament together.

In this article, agalma as synecdoche is portrayed by reviewing some of Plato's dialogues. Commencing with *Timaeus*, the myth of the creation of the world is analysed. Then the article traverses through the region of death (in *Myth of Er*) via the birth and development of reason in *The Allegory of the Cave*; both of these synecdoches presented in Plato's *Republic*. Finally, the article examines the dialogue *Symposium*, in which Socrates and other characters gather to praise *Eros*. In *Symposium*, Socrates is described by Alcibiades as an agalma because he is very attracted to him. Not because Socrates is visually beautiful – he is absolutely not. But because of his wisdom, he is immensely beautiful on the inside.

In Plato's dialogues, very complicated subject matters are explained in a synecdochical form, hereby making sense of the unfathomable. The oeuvre of Plato is like a mysterious journey into a very intricate labyrinth with many doorways leading in many directions and into different areas of being. Likewise, Bernard Meyer describes synecdoche as 'a nebula of figures shimmering around a stable kernel' (1993, p. 85; my translation). Even though the concept of synecdoche has been associated with *intellectio* and *conception* (Nerlich, 2010, p. 300), it is nevertheless often grounded on an unfathomable nothingness, which in its vastness cannot be grasped intellectually. Correspondingly, the Apollonian structure of agalma dissolves into an infinite Dionysian nebula. Agalma leads to the well from which playful learning, teaching, and research derives. But this well is originally chaotic. The correspondence with Apollo is thus necessary to intellectually make sense of the irrational amalga-mation of the Dionysian world; and to imagine and present things in new and unexpected ways.

When reading the article, try to identify the concepts of agalma, ludus, paidia, agon, alea, mimicry, and ilinx. They will not always appear explicit. You can also spot the character of Eros, Apollo and Dionysus here and there. They are sometimes lurking in the background; waiting to be discovered by you. And if you regard the body text as images of an agalmatic jewellery box; then the endnotes – a route you don't necessarily need to follow – are dealing more thoroughly with the jewel inside.

God as synecdoche

'When the father and creator saw the creature which he had made moving and living, the created image[1] of the eternal gods, he rejoiced, and in his joy determined to make the copy still more like the original' (Plato, 2018, 37c5-7).

To understand why the image plays such an important role in Plato's portrait of the world and its creation, we will take a closer look at some of his accounts. In *Timaeus* 'the motion of the same' and 'the motion of the other' is described. The motion of the same is the unchangeable intelligible pattern of which the world is designed. It is without beginning or end, indestructible and incomparable; hence it is one perfect unity. The motion of the other is the imitation of this unchangeable pattern. It is the sensible world, created and visible, always in a process of becoming and perishing, but never really *is*.

Cosmos (Kósmos: meaning adornment as well as universe) is an image that helps *the motion of the same* to present itself as truthfully and beautifully as possible – as when Timaeus describes the intelligent *sphere of the same* as a 'broidered adornment' (Plato, 1929, 40a7). The purpose of Timaeus' synecdochic imagery is to show and explain in a playful manner that which can neither show nor explain itself directly. To tell of the *choric dances*; the orbits and conjunctions of earth and the other gods (the stars), Timaeus explains, 'without a visible model this would be but wasted labour' (Plato, 1929, 40d3-4).

Since Timaeus cannot address *the work of the creator* directly – 'even if we found him, to tell of him to all men would be impossible' (Plato, 2018, 28c4-6) – it is a choice between explaining something poetically through images; or saying nothing. And Timaeus chooses to say something: 'When reason is in the neighbourhood of sense, and the circle of the other or diverse is moving truly, then arise true opinions and beliefs' (Plato, 2018, 37b5-8**).** That means; when beauty is directed towards true knowledge then poetry – and hence play – has found its appropriate purpose. As Fink interprets Plato's scenery: 'The enchanting luminosity of the beautiful is a beacon,' (2016, p. 98) that lights up the invisible realm of thought and makes it visible. Yet, we are also told that the beautiful 'gleams as though touched by the non-sensuous light of the idea.' (ibid.) It's like a jewelry box sheltering its gleaming treasure; but it is not certain which is inside; beauty or truth? The sensuous or the intelligible?

To explain how the creation of the cosmos took place is a complicated matter. In Timaeus, creation is at first an

enterprise between Being (father) and becoming (offspring). The father thereupon creates the soul (the ruler and mistress of the body) by blending the indivisible Being with the sensuous bodies of becoming. Although the father is here perceived as the creator, play is usually not associated with perfection as that of god. As Caillois points out: 'A result known beforehand 'with no possibility of error or surprise, [..] is incompatible with the nature of play' (2001, p. 9). The player will feel no engagement, no excitement, nor urge for innovation. But god, lacking nothing and therefore being 'free from jealousy, desired that all things should be as like himself' (Plato, 2018, 29e1-3). God never creates anything new. Being without eyes, since nothing outside him is to be seen, he appears almost like an unborn fetus in a womb. Having no arms or legs 'he was made to move in the same manner [..] within his own limits revolving in a circle' (Plato, 2018, 34a3-6). And needing neither mouth nor digestive organs 'since there was nothing which went from him or came into him' (Plato, 2018, 33c3-5). So, either the father is not playing at all, or he is somehow intermingled with the mistress and the offspring.

According to Fink, the Platonic conception of play is placed in the sphere of sensuous appearance, and assigned an intermediate role. The offspring – understood as the created world – must be seen as this intermediate nature. Humans – belonging to the sensuous sphere – are ruled by the principle of ilinx. Being born and encased in a mortal body, humans are at first without intelligence. Confused and swirling irregularly around in all directions, they are as 'bound within a mighty river' (Plato, 1925b, 43a6). But by right educational training, chaos and disorder is gradually replaced by stability and structure, Timaeus explains.

Play as non-actuality

In the above interpretation of creation, the created world is a copy of an original. Viewed as such, Fink notes, play is reason 'disguised in the sensuous, but already shimmering with the gleam of truth' (Fink, 2016, p.117). Sebastian Martin Möring describes Fink's dual structure of play – the correspondence between the sensuous and the intelligible – as 'a synecdochic part-for-whole relationship' (2013, p. 132). As Fink writes: 'Each plaything represents the totality of objects. [..] In the plaything the whole is concentrated in a single object' (2016, p. 24). The illusion of the plaything – its facade – is part of the object, 'as the shell belongs to the kernel and the appearance to the essence' (Fink, 1968, p. 26).

But the whole is not just an assembly of building blocks. Rather, the plaything is a playful portrayal or variation of the whole. As an image, it is its *own* original. As a toy, it represents the whole by containing it as non-actuality, Fink describes. Non-actuality allows you to imagine the toy to be anything other than it actually 'is'. And every time you play you add something new to the non-actuality of the play-world. Non-actuality is the inexhaustible well from which play springs. It is 'the ascent and decline of all finite things from the nameless nocturnal womb and tomb of every individuation' (Fink, 2016, p. 116). To understand play, poetic

images, and 'non-existing' mythical creatures, we have to pursue this 'from the horizon of the nothing', (Fink, 2016, p. 92) explains; from the nothing in our thinking; our empty intending and imagining. Everything new arrives from that which does-not-yet-exist: from non-actuality.

The plenitude of playful plateaus in Plato's plays

Plato approaches the not-yet-existing. According to Louis Marin, Plato's *Republic* – which we will soon arrive at – is not real, but rather a utopian fiction. Marin plays on the resemblance of *oú-topos* (no-place) and *eú-topos* (place of happiness). '*Utopia* is simultaneously *oú-topos* and *eú-topos*, the negative of the positive and the positive of the negative.' (Marin, 1984, p. 91) As a text *Republic* has only a literary existence, but *in* the text Eutopia is presented as a reality, Marin says.

To illustrate the schism, Marin describes *the double reversal* of presence and representation on *the utopic stage* of the tragic plays in ancient Greece. The first reversal relates to the hero wearing a mask, playing an*other* character. The nearness and presence, as experienced in ceremonial rituals in archaic culture, is now replaced by a re-presentational distance. What makes the tragic play theatrical is the distance between actor and role, *and* between actor and spectators. The second reversal concerns the relation between hero and chorus. Although the two are connected, the hero represents *the other milieu* of the narrative, Marin explains, whereas the chorus is present *on* stage, staging that which is being represented by the hero. The chorus members engage as they witness the hero's conflicts while continuously commenting on and debating the matters. They are spectators as well as actors; but on another plane and from the 'distance',since they are 'invisible' to the hero and cannot intervene directly in the narrative. Through the chorus, the tragic play 'becomes conscious' of itself and reflects on the fate and actions of the hero. The chorus as 'play within play' (Marin, 1984, p. 68) displays the dialectics between the plateaus and spaces 'on' stage.

On stage, we are told in Plato's *Laws*, the gods play along 'as companions in dancing: It is the device which enables them to be our chorus-leaders and stimulate us to movement, making us combine to sing and dance – and as this naturally 'charms' us, they invented the word "chorus"' (Plato, 1970, 654a2-6). Trevor Saunders here notes Plato's play with words, as *chorus* etymologically derives from *chara* (charm, joy, delight). Plato gives a 'serious' and a joyful reason for the coincidence of the words. The serious reason: performances given by chorus members are representations of *chara'*cter which must be played by men who themselves are well-educated and of superior physique and noble character (op. cit., 655-656; 814-817). The joyful reason: since human beings are predisposed with a sense of order and disorder in movement they are 'sensitive to both and can enjoy them' (op. cit., 653e4-6).

Plato argues that to learn to sing and dance well is part of intellectual development. Physical exercise and discipline starts already as 'education in the womb' and 'athletics of the embryo', (op. cit., p. 271; 789b1-2)

preventing the child from bad habits: –'all young things [..] always making uncoordinated noises and jumping about' (op. cit., 664e2-4).

Whereas Apollo is head of education of the youngest as well as the beautiful execution of the charms (singing and dancing), Dionysus is associated with the so-called *third chorus*; the noblest in the state, consisting of men over thirty. What makes them the noblest is that they – through the charms – have learned to express appropriate concord between reason and the emotional realm of poetry.

'So we are poets like yourselves,' Plato's philosophical character in *Laws* acknowledges, 'rivals and antagonists in the noblest of dramas.' (op. cit., 817a-b. Statkiewicz's translation p. 26). Here Max Statkiewicz identifies a shift from the 'strict opposition between poetry and philosophy, between truth and play, to the recognition of a mimetic tension between them' (Statkiewicz, p. 26). We might also call it a playful pairing of the sensuous and the intelligible: the visual representation of non-visual thought.

Statkiewicz argues that *chorus* is etymologically related to *khôra*.[2] In the discourse of Timaeus' tale of the creation of cosmos, he interprets khôra as 'region of all regions'. (Statkiewicz, 2009, p.136) [3] We must therefore return to Timaeus' tale to examine what this is. Halfway through, Timaeus decides to start afresh. Important information was left out in his previous version. Firstly, the universe is actually created in collaboration between Necessity and Reason. Reason persuades Necessity to choose what is good and to perform things in the most intelligent manner. Secondly, Timaeus adds a 'third kind' (Plato, 1925b, 48e4) accompanying Being and becoming. This third kind is 'that which is to receive duly in all its regions repeated copies of the intelligent and eternal things' (Plato, 1929, 51a1-2). It is 'the mother and receptacle of all creation visible and sensible, [her-/itself] invisible and formless, all-receptive and partaking in the intelligible in a manner most puzzling and hard to grasp' (Plato, 1929, 51a4-b2). This mother is the ever-existing region of all regions called khôra.

In Timaeus' second interpretation, khôra is assigned a prominent role as the *chorismos* (separation/difference) that connects Being and becoming – either as being mirror, matter, or space. Khôra is interpreted as matter in formulations such as 'odorless ointment', 'soft material', 'gold', and 'molding-stuff for everything.' (Plato, 1925b, 50c-e) Interpreted as 'indefinite space' it receives (by imaging, mirroring or copying) all that enters its region. These copies can assume any shape or appearance whatsoever, but only because khôra itself is so extremely malleable and devoid of any particular form or characteristics. Khôra, Timaeus explains, 'fleets ever as a phantom of something else—to come into existence **in** some other thing, clinging to existence as best it may, on pain of being nothing at all' (Plato, 1925b, 52c2-4). Being absolutely elusive, though, is also what makes it so impossible to locate and define. The necessity of the chaotic khôra as the 'beginning before the beginning', John Sallis (2017, p. 11) writes, disrupts the rational structure of the world created by God. And Statkiewicz (2009, p. 145) assists Sallis' viewpoint: 'The khôra apparently offers an irresistible resistance of play on a cosmic scale, a resistance to the ordering and stabilizing *poiesis* of the demiurge'. Statkiewicz compares khôra with Deleuze/Guattari's description in *A Thousand Plateaus* of the never-ending to-and-fro-movement of

deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation. In Timaeus' tale, regionalization 'seems to be accompanied by the opposite drive of *"de*-regionalization", which defies any possibility of a proper, essential assignment of place' (Statkiewicz, 2009, p.144). This interaction between regionalization and *de*-regionalization echoes Fink's correspondence between actuality and non-actuality. Not to mention the correspondence between Apollo and Dionysus; ludus and paidia; agalma and amalga; oú-topos and eú-topos.

Interlude

The characteristics of father, mother, and offspring seem incompatible. But elsewhere, Timaeus explains that Being, Becoming, and khôra existed prior to the creation of cosmos (Plato, 1925b, 52d3-4). They are three distinct things, but still necessary unified components of a spatio-temporal particular, as Allan Silverman (1992, p. 260) notes. In other words: what a plaything – or the mind and body of a playful academic – is composed of. Play is thus a result of the entanglement of father, mother, and offspring; and the mutual reflection of their differences.[4]

By not being a thing, khôra disrupts the rational adornments of the beautiful image. The rationalistic mapping and imaging of agalma stands over and out against the unlimited khôra (non-thing) that cannot be represented as an object and therefore cannot be opposite. That is also why the collaboration between Dionysus and Apollo is so complicated. The 'ends' will never meet – or assimilate. Imaging – and imagination – belongs to the agalmatic sphere of Apollo, since images are always structured and delimited. Apollo keeps returning from Dionysus' region with dreamlike phantasmagorical images that can never fully re-present the non-actuality of this region.

Khôra is where the non-actuality of Being resides. The poetic image – due to its openness toward non-actuality – aims at perfection, well aware it is never attainable. There is always more to show. As a poetic interpretation, the image reflects back on Being as a proof of its diversity. Since Being can never be depicted or imagined in its entirety, mirroring is rather a mental contemplation of the divine Being as a whole, envisioned from the actuality of one of its manifold sensuous parts.[5]

Since khôra – according to Statkiewicz (2009, p. 152) – is 'the space of marginal indeterminacy, the effacement of all character, a space beyond kind, genre, or gender,' he suggests that Socrates *is* the embodiment of khôra. Because of his marginality, and because he is comparable to nothing, he is impossible to determine. Statkiewicz mentions Socrates' feminine traits. For instance his 'fostering' and 'midwifing', his association with women-teachers (Diotima, Sappho, and Aspasia), and his constant reference to weaving. With a hermeneutic mindset like that of a poet, Socrates could also be confused with Hermes, the divine messenger moving swiftly across the border between the living and the dead, who is equipped with a 'playful thinking that is more compelling than the rigor of science,' as Heidegger writes (1971a, p.29). In a few sections the article will cross this border of

life and death.

Cosmic redundancy

Gregory Bateson's *theory of play* – and his *levels of learning* moving towards *the pattern of patterns* (Level IV presumably not available for mortals) – is reminiscent of the region of all regions. Ultimately, it is where we experience emptiness. 'Mind is empty; it is nothing,' writes Bateson (1979, p. 11). To become – or connect with – something other, at some point we all need to pass through the territory of nothing.

Paul Tosey compares Bateson's levels of learning with 'nested loops or Russian dolls' (2006, p. 4). Russian dolls … Yet another agalmatic pattern appears! The ability to identify and map (connections between) patterns (or dolls) relies on the recognition of a redundancy within each pattern (Bateson, 1972, p. 406). But while learning, we are sometimes confronted with the perplexity of intermingled patterns, contexts, or worldviews, resulting in double-binds of simultaneously *both-and* and *either-or*. For some, this inconsistency may lead to insanity, Bateson warns. For others, it results in creativity and play, merging the player into 'all the processes of relationships in some vast ecology or aesthetic cosmic interaction' (Bateson, 1972, pp. 304-305).

The cave as synecdoche

In Plato's *Allegory of the Cave* we meet the mortals who are nested in their physical body inside a cave, isolated from the reality outside. Kristi Krumnow (2009) interprets the womb as synecdoche of the cave; referring to Luce Irigaray's interpretation of the allegory in *Speculum of the Other Woman*. Irigaray's book provides a critique of the speculative, phallic discourse of Western metaphysical philosophy by comparing it with the gynaecological mirroring instrument (the speculum) utilised to investigate the uterus.

Irigaray describes 'the play of shadows' on the wall inside the cave; a philosophical game of je/jeu[6] in the theatrical arena of representation (1985, p. 245) The mortals, chained together, are bound to watch this game. The debating shadows on the wall stem from a puppetry performed behind the back of the mortals. The mortals cannot see the puppets directly. In Plato's allegory these puppets are called *agalma* (Plato, 1969, 517d7-8). Whether the puppets (or the puppeteers) are actors, chorus members, statues of gods, or poets, we can leave open for interpretation here.

Suddenly, an anonymous 'hero' breaks free of the chains and makes her/his way up from the womb/cave to the outside world where she/he finally sees the daylight. The hero's previous reality was apparently just a poetic game. What she/he now realises and must return to teach is 'the game of outside versus inside' (Krumnow, p.

76). It is the game of truth versus fantasy; reality versus dream; the intelligible versus the sensuous; poetry versus knowledge; mythos versus logos; good versus evil. '[W]hat has been forgotten in all these oppositions,' (Irigaray, 195, p. 247) deprecates, 'is how to pass through the passage, how to negotiate it – the forgotten transmission.' Irigaray calls it the *forgotten vagina*. She makes us aware how well Plato's cave allegory similes the child's passage through the vagina. She only forgets that the phallus is a passage too. And she chooses not to highlight 'female' qualities found in Plato's dialogues, such as openness, unrestrictedness, abundance, and diversity. These qualities are the exact 'opposite' of the rational repetition performed by the unchangeable father. Instead, she decries the Western metaphysical misappropriation of the female surplus as an unnecessary surplus (Krumnow, 2009, p. 77): that necessary surplus that Fink describes as the non-actuality of play.

Death as synecdoche

Now we move on to the to-and-fro-play of life and death performed in Plato's *Myth of Er*. Er – the hero of Socrates' story in *Republic* – is a soldier, whose soul, after he dies, is sent to 'a mysterious region'. (Plato, 1969, 614c1) It is the daemonic place between 'death' and (re)birth. Unlike other souls, Er is chosen to return to his previous body as a messenger from the afterlife. He now gets to come behind the scenes, where he is initiated into what happens when souls leave their physical body.

Er arrives at a place with two openings leading towards the earth and two openings towards the sky. Between these openings, the judges sit and decide which way to send the arriving souls. When the souls have earned their punishment or reward they either return through the mouth of the earth, weary and soiled; or descend out of heaven, clean and bright. They are now accompanied to a festival camp; here celebrating and exchanging stories of what they experienced.

About a week later they are sent to *the spindle of Necessity*, which holds together the entire cosmos. Here, the female is 'pulling the strings'. From the very detailed description it is relevant to highlight the eight whorls, which – mimicking agalma – are enfolded 'as boxes that fit into one another' (Plato, 1969, 616d3-4). We get a lively picture of Necessity and her daughters – the three Fates: Lachesis, Clotho, and Atropos – who, as chorus members, orchestrate the spindle spinning the web of each soul's destiny. Lachesis sings: 'Souls that live for a day, now is the beginning of another cycle of mortal generation where birth is the beacon of death' (Plato, 1969, 617d6-7). Thereupon the souls are asked to choose a character for their next reincarnation. Er notices that most souls choose by the habits of their former lives; mainly those who came back from heaven since they are unexercised in suffering. The souls coming from the mouth of the earth (hell) are more thoughtful and better prepared for choosing well due to bad experiences. That is how the interchange of good and evil occurs, 'as well as because of the chances of the lot,' (Plato, 1969, 619d6-7) Socrates explains. The allotment of character thus occurs as a combination of virtuous judgment *and* lottery. After choosing their destiny, the souls travel to

the Plain of Oblivion situated by the River of Forgetfulness (River of Lethe) 'whose waters no vessel can contain' (Plato, 1969, 621a4). They are here told to drink water from the river as it will make them forget afterlife when they reincarnate. Then, while sleeping, there is an earthquake and the souls are whirled up in a maelstrom, leading to birth. [7]

The moral of the story is that the ability to choose well depends on experience, character, and fate. Because the soul is immortal it must pass through many characters and all kinds of good and evil. And that goes for the playful academic as well. You will never meet the unexpected or get a nuanced, innovative perspective in your research, if you only play by the (virtuous) book or by habit. If we follow Socrates' advice at the end of the story, when crossing the River of Lethe, 'we receive our reward, as the victors in the games. [..] And thus both here and in that journey of a thousand years (in death/afterlife) [..] we shall fare well' (Plato, 1969, 621c-d, my parentheses). Faring well in this daemonic region of good and evil inevitably leads to playful well-being (eu-daimonia).

The question is whether the *Myth of Er* is merely poetic play or a valid portrait of cosmos and proof of immortality. Griet Schils elaborates a 'scientific' interpretation of the whole scenery (1993, pp. 101-114), but she remarks that the description of the souls' journey and the moral messages of the story rely heavily on sensible features and visual symbols. And if we examine the imagery of the myth, which, according to Otto Brendel, is so rich in detail and completely constructed as a true vision; then the answer to the question is – for him – still absent. But then again, that is seen from a scientific, evidence-based viewpoint. The images are not 'parts of a systematic deduction but of a slowly developing, dreamlike, optical and mythical vision' (Brendel, 1977, p. 67).

Is cosmos then – and humans existing in it – ruled by paidia or ludus? From a scientific *and* a poetic viewpoint the answer is – and will always be – hidden. Otherwise, there would be no room for interpretation or playful learning.

Agalma as the synecdoche of synecdoches

In Plato's *Symposium* Eros is the hero. Agathon's house, where the feast is held, is transformed into a synagogue of play – evoking the 'madness and Bacchic frenzy of philosophy' (Plato, 1998, 218b3). The participants are gathered here in a circle, competing over who can provide the best praise of Eros. When it is Socrates' turn, he decides to tell what his female teacher, Diotima, taught him about Eros. It turns out that she actually practices the same questioning techniques as Socrates.

Diotima reports that Eros' father was Poros (wealth, abundance) and his mother was Penia (poverty, lack). Eros inherited these qualities from his parents. Being intermediate between couples of opposites: mortal-immortal, ignorant-wise, ugly-beautiful, Eros interprets between gods and men.

Since God already knows everything, he doesn't seek or desire knowledge. Mortals, contrarily, desire wisdom, beauty, and happiness, and to have these qualities always; i.e. mortals desire immortality. But as immortality lies beyond the reach of mortals it can be attained only by re-production (genetically, intellectually, or spiritually), Diotima says. Offspring resembles what it originates from but always adds something new to the old: 'All creation or passage of non-being into being is poetry or making' (Plato, 2018, 205c1-2). Therefore, only the poets genuinely desire 'the supreme and treacherous love' (Plato, 1998, 205d); not those who pursue love through business, gymnastics – or even philosophy, Diotima remarks. Mysteriously, also for her, the knowledge we have is always changing. Even science seems to arise and degenerate. She implicitly says here, that science must be approached poetically and playfully. Forgetfulness, understood as departure of knowledge, 'is renewed and preserved by recollection, and appears to be the same although in reality new' (Plato, 1996, 208b1-2). Everything is forever renewed in this way, Diotima concludes.

Through Diotima's teaching Socrates learns that Eros desires that which he lacks. But desire is always intentional, possessive, and consuming. So ultimately, true love is to give what you don't have. In other words: to renounce possession of knowledge and to desire nothing. As we know from Plato's dialogues, Socrates does that by posing questions instead of knowing the answers in advance. The emptier he gets, the more room (khôra) he provides for renewed knowledge.

Suddenly a drunken person, Alcibiades, crashes the symposium. Instead of exulting Eros, he intends to praise Socrates. Alcibiades commences by comparing Socrates with a comical Silenus-figure that resembles a satyr and contains smaller statues of gods (*agalmata theon*) inside. Socrates, he says, claims to know nothing and acts like a child. He spends his time playing games and making a fool of other people. But albeit Socrates is ugly on the outside, Alcibiades once had the chance to open him up and see the images inside (*entós agálmata*): 'divine and golden, so perfectly fair and wondrous' (Plato, 1925a, 217a1). Socrates' words were so redundant with images of virtue (*agálmat᾽ aretís*). Therefore, Alcibiades tried to seduce him sexually to get his insights in return. But without success.

Jacques Lacan elaborates a comprehensive analysis of the agalma in Symposium. Lacan's focus revolves around Alcibiades' unresolved desires that can never lead to happiness or true beauty. In Alcibiades, there are no signs of letting go of egoistic desires. He wants to own the object of his desire. The synecdochic to-and-fro-play of part-whole is not established; it goes only one-way. For Lacan, agalma remains a partial, fetishistic object (objet petit *a*). Agalma is 'the summation of a pile of partial objects, which is not at all the same as the total object.' (Lacan, 2015a, p. 144)

Which part of the triangle father-mother-offspring agalma represents in Lacan's analysis is not certain. As a fetishistic object it can be characterised as offspring. Described as an 'empty place' (Lacan 2015b, p. 108) agalma sounds more like khôra. Associated with the phallus as a 'phantasmatic, non-existent "thing"' (Johnston 2002), agalma adheres to father. Lacan even calls feces agalma:

> [W]e can see very well how poo easily assumes the function of what I have called, my goodness, agalma. [T]he effects that are attached to the mother's agalmatic relationship to her child's excrement [..] is only conceivable in its relation to the phallus, to its absence, and to phallic anxiety as such (Lacan, 2015b, p. 301).

Like in the womb, the child experiences a distanceless nearness when playing with its poo. Poo is the un-representational abjectal amalgamation of chaotic matter, which in itself is meaningless. As soon as the poo becomes an agalmatic object, its representational character creates a distance and therefore a desire to re-establish the original state of nearness and sameness. This is not possible. Thus, another kind of play takes over: symbolic play (see also Piaget, 1962. The movement of desire is now incessantly re-directed in the mirror-play of father-mother-offspring; never finding rest in one of them. Since the separation is already established, phallic anxiety (Fear of loss of control or meaning. Fear of changes, of the unfamiliar, or of death) needs to be confronted and overcome for play and creativity to arise. The passage of the *forgotten vagina* (the to-and-fro movement between actuality and non-actuality) must be cleared.

Lacan does not develop a playful re-creative perspective on agalma. At least not as how we find it in Plato's dialogues: abundance, pregnancy, fostering. His characterisation remains at the subject-object-level of unresolved psychological (or pathological) desires, which never overcome Bateson's double-bind of incompatible contexts. Alcibiades cannot win the Platonic game of love, and therefore he will never be pregnant with *agálmat᾽ aretís*. But this lack which is inserted 'in-between' the phallus, empty place, and object *a*, may nevertheless be a precondition or precursor for the 'impossible' synthesis, which leads to play and creativity.

 In *Symposium*, Plato implicitly criticises Alcibiades' understanding of Eros. Joel Alden Schlosser characterises the clash between Socrates and Alcibiades as 'a synecdoche for the conflict between philosophy and the Athenian democracy' (2014, p. 80). In Plato's dialogue *Phaedrus* we get a clearer picture of Socrates' own idea of the *noble* relation between the lover and the beloved. The teacher 'chooses his love from the ranks of the beautiful according to his character, and he fashions him and adorns him like a statue (agalma), as though he were his god' (Plato, 1914, 252d6-e1, my parentheses). As a votive gift to his student the teacher offers total devotion. It is the 'sacrifice to his beloved as to an idol or a god' (Plato, 1914, 251a6). Hence, the student is regarded as a synecdoche of god. Or, consistent with Fink's notion of play: as a symbol of the world. The hierarchical order of god, teacher and student is here converted into mutual respect and inspiration. The beautiful student is worshipped as an agalma and formed in the image of god. The teacher's desire now appears as a shuddering awe; as the abstemious passionate self-surrender, which is nevertheless, according to Hackforth (Plato, 1972, p.98), a profound joy and self-satisfaction. In the presence of the beautiful student, the plumage of the teacher's soul is now fertilised. '*What men call Eros the gods call* [..] *the winged one, because of his power to renew the plumage of the soul*,' (op. cit., p. 96) writes Hackforth.

As teachers, thus, both Socrates and Diotima – in the mode of khôra, devoid of any specific form or

characteristics – treat their student as 'molding-stuff for everything' (Plato, 1925b, 50c). When they 'draw the waters of their inspiration from Zeus, like the bacchantes[8], they pour it out upon the beloved and make him, so far as possible, like their god' (Plato, 1925a, 253a6-8). They devote themselves to foster the god-like disposition within the soul of the student. This disposition could also be characterised as individuality, playfulness, or openness towards any source of knowledge.

David Reeve suggests that agalma is a bridge between gods and mortals; 'a bridge to something else—an image for what is itself necessarily beyond images' (2006, p. 137). Or as Diotima puts it: an image that exposes 'the beautiful through that which makes it visible' (Plato, 1925a, 212a3-4). As a daemon¸ Eros is *that* bridge which brings near what is separated. So Alcibiades' portrayal of Socrates as a true daemon (219c1) is actually not far-fetched. The way he behaves and is presented by Plato matches the description of Eros. He is always the same *and* different. Socrates is a chameleon. He shifts between the perspective of father, mother, and offspring. Or between the three part of the soul: eros (desire), thymos (agon), and logos (reason). Like an utmost elegant choric dancer, he moves from one context to another.

But isn't the world, and our mind trying to fathom its complexity, also a contradictory, paradoxical, and playful movement across faculties, dimensions, and perspectives. Maybe Plato's portrait of Socrates should be regarded as an epistemological investigation of the playful wanderer's 'Steps to an ecology of mind' (Bateson, 1972).

Postlude: new beginning of the circle

As a chorus circuiting around their hero, the participants in *Symposium* come up with a variety of interpretations of Eros viewed from the perspective of their own reality or profession. Eros as non-actuality resides inside the actuality of each story. But which interpretation comes closest to the truth?

H.-G. Gadamer describes the original meaning of play as *dancing* and *participation* – just like the round dance of Eros in Symposium is. Play is the to-and-fro (or circular) movement that 'renews itself in constant repetition' (Gadamer, 2013, p. 108). As an interpretive experience, Kirby and Brolin remarks, play 'remains open-ended to subsequent adjustments in interpretation,' (2016, p. 13) and enables us to experience things from other perspectives. According to Gadamer, play is truth without any predetermined structure or method, since method itself delimits truth to address specific matters. Thus Monica Vilhauer regards Gadamer's conception of play as 'an alternative to modern scientific method.' (2010, p. 25)

For Gadamer, 'correct' interpretation is a very flexible and relative matter. It is the re-creation of an original, but represented in accordance with the meaning or motive/motif of the interpreter. Just repeating the original punctiliously would instead be like 'the imitation of an imitation' that even Plato devalues. In re-creation, the interpreter must leave out, highlight, or exaggerate, making a caricature out of the original by deselecting

'irrelevant' elements; but hereby also revealing the essential motive.

Every act of play, every artwork, or academic article is necessarily transformed into structure. Every representation must present its own form and style. But, as Gadamer specifies, 'structure is also play' (2013, p. 121), since representation achieves its full being only each time it is played, displayed, or read. 'Transformation into structure' (ibid.) *is* a reduction, but simultaneously it generates an increase of being. Challenging the Platonic conception of the unchangeable *circle of the same*, Gadamer describes the image as an overflow emanating from the original. And 'if the original One is not diminished by the outflow of the many from it, this means that being increases,' (Gadamer, 2013, p. 141) concludes. Since every image (or dis-play) is an increase of being, it is never a mere reproduction of an original. What we recognise in the image is not just what we already know. 'The joy of recognition is the joy of knowing *more* than is already familiar,' explains Gadamer (2013, p. 118). The image is, like Fink's plaything, a symbol of the world. As Kirby and Graham write: 'The things of the world that are usually hidden are made known to us (or brought into presence) only through the structure of play' (2016, p. 19). Play makes the world more intelligible. It provides openness towards non-actuality, which pours 'back into' the actual play. It challenges our normal understanding of reality and therefore enables formation. That is why Gadamer sees a continuity between play, image (Bild), and formation (Bildung). And like his conception of play as circular movement, 'Bildung has no goal outside itself' (Gadamer, 2013, p. 11).

Gadamer highlights the festival as an event that exhibits similar features as play. Er met the souls gathering at a festival before reincarnation. *Symposium* was a feast. An academic conference, Jean Grondin writes, still today comprises the festive, celebrative and ritualistic qualities as in *Symposium*. (2001, p. 46) Everyone attending is immersed in a play that exceeds their own choice or intending. Even if the festival is a recurrent commemoration of a historical event, it is never an exact repetition of the original event. It must be re-created. 'Thus its own original essence is always to be something different. [..] It has its being only in becoming and return' (Gadamer, 2013, p. 126). Like theatrical plays, the festival only exists due to the presence and reenactment of the participants.

'All playing is a being-played,' says Gadamer (2013, p. 121). Play enchants and captures the player. He/she is left in a state of self-forgetfulness, immersed and interwoven into an uncontrollable event. For Gadamer, being 'outside' oneself is not an ecstatic state of madness. Rather, it is the ability to be present, participate, and pay full attention. Self-forgetfulness still relies on the rational reasoning of Apollo to emerge from the Dionysian. '[Apollo] has to emerge to make the wild, chaotic nature of life manageable and understandable. Otherwise we are lost in unmediated madness,' writes Dixon, (2009, p. 4). Nevertheless, Plato advocates for a divine madness superior to human sanity. '[H]e who without the divine madness comes to the doors of the Muses, confident that he will be a good poet by art, meets with no success, and the poetry of the sane man vanishes into nothingness before that of the inspired madmen' (Plato, 1914, 245a4-7).

The question is whether we really understand anything without the Dionysian madness: the ability to defy

borders and move unrestrictedly. Apollo, with his fantasies and 'transformation into structure', would not get very far and wide in his mapping of the world if it was not for the pioneering spirit of Dionysus. But without Apollo, Dionysus' unstructured, immemorial region would never be (un)covered. It would remain forgotten in non-actuality. Between sanity and insanity lies the true agon and agony (thymos) of the playful soul. In the duel of Dionysus and Apollo the image is re-created.

Gadamer's reference to the immemorial[9], residing in the irrational region of non-actuality, or by the river of Lethe, is 'what reason can never encompass, but at the same time, [..] what makes reason possible,' Grondin writes (2001, p. 49). Since knowledge by itself cannot bring us the unknown, Gadamer argues that experience (more precisely: Erfahrung der Nichtigkeit[10]) can lead us on the way. Experience, Gadamer says, does not provide the tools of method, but is instead a reversal of consciousness. 'Whether experience moves by expanding into the manifoldness of the contents or as the continual emergence of new forms of mind', (Gadamer, 2013, p. 363) it stems from the unfamiliar and unknown. An experienced academic is not experienced due to many years at university, but *because* of his/her openness to new experiences. The experi(m)enting academic is radically undogmatic, and because of that, is better prepared for new and unexpected experiences.

The playful academic is not just repeating or confirming existing knowledge, nor blindly following dogmatic procedures of academia. By virtue of openness to *Erfahrung der Nichtigkeit* the playful academic is prepared to take chances and immerse into the whirlpool of unexplored material. He/she is not afraid of challenging authorities of existing knowledge.

The playful academic is Eros the interpreter. Dancing swiftly to-and-fro in a circular movement between ludus and paidia, agalma and amalga, she/he experiences and re-creates from the immemorial region of nothingness. Re-using the last sentence of Gadamer's *Truth and Method*: The playful academic re-creates by way of a Socratic 'discipline of questioning and inquiring, a discipline that guarantees truth' (Gadamer, 2013, p. 506).

Footnotes

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[1] Image (and copy) is here the English translation of agalma. In Peter Kalkavage's translation agalma is *sanctuary*. In Cornford's version 'cosmos is an agalma of the intelligible gods' (Cornford, 1997, p. 101). In this quote Lamb notes Plato's play on *agalma* (thing of joy, statue) and *agasthai* (to rejoice) (Plato, 1925b, 37c.)

[2] And Jean-François Mattéi associates khôra with a) chóra (emptiness, void, space/place), b) khatéō (lack, desire, loss), and c) kháos (chaos, empty space, abyss).

[3] Presumably Statkiewicz is here referring to Martin Heidegger's description of the 'region of all regions'. (Heidegger, 1966, p. 65) Elsewhere it is described as 'the open expanse'. Like the groundless abyss of kháos, khôra is the wide gaping of the surroundings that surround, Heidegger writes. 'The open expanse is not, however, the emptiness of a container, but rather [..] the open that retains much' (Heidegger, 2018, p. 250). However, the objectlessness of the khôra, says Heidegger, is not a sign of lack, error, or insufficiency, but of its superior being (ibid).

As Martina Roesner remarks: 'Heidegger's overall thinking – its inner structure and unity – is based on play as a ground figure' (Roesner, 2003, p. xi; my translation). According to Roesner, in Heidegger's thinking there is a play between two overall perspectives: groundlessness and holism. Heidegger criticises the rational reasoning within the history of western thinking and places it over against its origin – *the Shrine of Nothing* – hereby undermining the stability of Being. Nevertheless, by developing narratives of Being such as *worldplay* and *the mirrorplay of the fourfold*, Heidegger maintains the notion of Being's absolute unity and cohesiveness. This strife between groundlessness and holism could be characterised as the play – or love – between Dionysus and Apollo; or between the jewel and the jewellery box of agalma.

[4] For Heidegger, the mirror-play of the fourfold (earth, sky, gods and mortals) – or worldplay – is a poetic round dance where 'the four nestle into their unifying presence, in which each one retains its own nature' (Heidegger, 1971b, p. 178). For mortals death is 'the shrine of Nothing', which in turn is 'the shelter of Being' (Heidegger, 1971b, p. 176). The world and its things belong together; the same way as jewel and jewellery box do. What distinguishes them is not their size (big/small), but rather their difference. 'The dif-ference is neither distinction nor relation. [..] The dif-ference is *the* dimension, insofar as it measures out, apportions, world and thing, each to its own' (Heidegger, 1971b, p. 200). The dimension of dif-ference *is* khôra making room for the world and its things.

[5] So how do we, as playful academics, approach and bring out the mystery of Being, without violating the difference between Being, khôra, and becoming? 'To guard the purity of the mystery's wellspring seems to me hardest of all,' (Heidegger, 1971a, p. 50) admits. To approach it in the form of a scientific dissertation will not suffice because then, Heidegger says, the wellspring too easily congeals. He neither trusts that it 'can be adequately conceived by the help of imagination and the ability-to-form-images' (Heidegger, 2003, p. 74; my translation). Keeping in mind that khôra is indefinite space, and that imaging is fundamentally delimiting, we might follow the advice of Simone Weil and 'continually suspend the work of the imagination filling the void within ourselves. [..] The imagination, filler up of the void, is essentially a liar (Weil, 2003, p. 16).

But what kind of non-intentional thinking does Heidegger put in place when suspending imaging and imagination? He suggests that we release ourselves from representational thinking of that 'which we really can not think' (Heidegger, 1966, p.83). Since the region of all regions is prior to thinking, it demands a willingly freeing ourselves from any willing. On the one hand, it is 'this restless to and fro between yes and no' (Heidegger, 1966, p. 75). But because any decision is forever suspended, this betweenness should rather be understood as resting and waiting. As if he was following the footsteps of Socrates who never jumps to a conclusion, Heidegger pleads for 'exulting in waiting, through which we become more waitful and more void'

(1966, p. 82). Receiving and responding to the flow of thoughts unintentionally and spontaneously is for Heidegger noble-mindedness itself. He searches for a word that captures the meaning of the region of all regions. In Heraclitus' word *Anchivasíi* from Fragment 122, Heidegger finds a word that comprises both rest (*anhi*: nearness) and movement (*vataio*: move ahead). His own interpretation is *moving-into-nearness*. John Burnet's translation of the word is *debate* (1920), and the translation in (Adler, 1971, p. 41) is *questioning*. It seems, then, that we in our search of khôra and the meaning of academic playfulness are in the neighbourhood of Socrates' playful inquiring, questioning, debating, and dialoguing – without intention of reaching a definite answer. Just approaching, getting closer, circuiting back-and-forth.

We are here moving-into-nearness of the core (the khôra) of the well-being of play. The well from which everything springs is the region of all regions where Dionysus resides. We cannot imagine nor speak directly about it. We need Apollo's ability to interpret and transform it into images. In this sense agalma is only the jewellery box. The jewel in itself is rather the amalga that has no boundaries. This qualitative distinction is absolutely necessary in order to accommodate Caillois' four aspects of play; primarily the perplexity of the ilinx and the randomness of alea. But even the masks of mimicry and the combats of agon would be impossible to maintain without the distinction of agalma and amalga. Without the anarchic amalga-mation inherent in paidia, play would be static. We would be stuck in complicated ludic structures of agalma: There would no such thing as play.

[6] Irigaray here juggles with the similarity between the French words for 'I' and 'game'.

[7] Heidegger notices an inseparable bond between lethe (oblivion) and á-letheia (un-forgetfulness, or un-hiddenness). Heidegger argues that 'aletheia appears as theá, as goddess' (Heidegger, 1992, p. 123). This goddess is clearly associated with khôra. As Heidegger writes: 'Lethe, in Plato's myth, is the aletheia of a field that resides not in the here but in the there. [..] It is bare of all that grows as well as completely empty of everything that the earth allows to spring forth' (ibid.). The field of Lethe is fundamentally different from the world of mortals.

What is forgotten is not something hidden away that just needs to be re-collected. That would only result in the inertia of an enormous amount of structured information stored inside boxes inside boxes inside boxes. And it would rob play of its purpose. The relation between lethe and áletheia is more like that of an agalma embracing a floating stream of pure amalga-mation. 'Lethe, the oblivion of withdrawing concealment, is that withdrawal by means of which alone the essence of aletheia can be preserved and thus be and remain unforgotten,' says Heidegger (1992, p. 127). The jewel of agalma is the (un)concealed áletheia within the concealing and conserving jewellery box of Lethe. Humans can only be, and things can only appear, because everything is not revealed simultaneously. Humans are born and come to presence as beings only because the truth and openness of Being can be preserved and secured. But are humans meant to remember, like Er did, the souls journey to the daemonic region? Simone Weil warns: Belief in immortality 'robs death of its purpose' (2003, p. 37).

[8] A bacchant is a priest/priestess; a follower of Bacchus. Bacchus is the Greco-Roman equivalent of Dionysus: the god of wine and ecstasy. He is the originator of the dithyrambe, comedy and tragedy. He was destined to wander aimlessly from place to place, and his mentor was the satyr Silenus. Bacchus is unmistakably reminiscent of Socrates.

[9] Das Unvordenkliche (Gadamer, 1993, p. 366)

[10] (Gadamer, 2010, p. 360)

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