No Laughing Matter:
Playfulness and a Good Life

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To those I spend my leisure time with: dreamers, memers, and streamers. ilysm

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I chose to attend Vanderbilt because I knew its Philosophy Department offered pluralism. My dissertation committee reflects this, consisting of analytic, continental, pragmatist, and empirically-minded philosophers. My own research pulls from each tradition. My committee members also write in different styles, but they all clarify academic obscurity. I hope my writing does too. This dissertation is a mosaic of disciplines because no single one could shade its subject. A dissertation like this could only feel at home at Vanderbilt, and for the ways the Philosophy Department shaped me—and allowed me to shape myself—I am grateful.

I also chose Vanderbilt because I met real people here—not egos or absent-minded sages but ἄνθρωποι, *Menschen*. I put as many on my committee as possible, John Lachs and Jeffrey Tlumak providing supererogatory intellectual support. Not on my committee, but deserving mention, are Scott F. Aikin, Elizabeth Fiss, and friends too numerous to list. I would have flunked without these people. Graduate school was meaningful but full of misfortune—a fire that damaged my first apartment, a dog with anxiety, a divorce, minor health problems, the death of my father, and my own on-going bouts with anxiety and depression. Thanks to Jonna Whitman, Madison Johnson, and Brittany Mae Myer for their help. And thanks to the Graduate School for offering resources for students like me, the first in my family to graduate college and part of a small group of Hispanics earning graduate degrees. The Provost Graduate Fellowship allowed me to make a living in Nashville, even with challenges in a booming and increasingly expensive city. This might seem hyperbolic, but it is not. Without a fed, sheltered, well, and loved body, I would have lacked a mind for this work. I still might. But please, dear reader, accept this as a practical exercise in not letting the perfect be the enemy of the good enough (hopefully).

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Page

ABBREVIATIONS OF ARISTOTLE'S WORKS

Cat. *Categories*

DA *On the Soul*

EE *Eudemian Ethics*

EN *Nicomachean Ethics*

MM *Magna Moralia*

Pol. *Politics*

Rhet. *Rhetoric*

Met. *Metaphysics*

For convenience's sake, I always cite the works in Jonathan Barnes' *Complete Works of Aristotle* by Princeton University Press. And when referring to the Greek, I use Harvard University Press's Loeb Classical Library editions.

Introduction

PHILOSOPHY AND THE ATHENIAN PLAYPEN

"Plato's Academy." The term conjures images of bearded men in a flowing, white tunics, pontificating as they stroll among marble buildings. And even though many colleges and universities perpetuate this image, it is inaccurate. Ancient Greece was vibrant, playful. For example, before he wrote his dialogues and founded the Academy, Plato crushed opponents in the wrestling ring. His wrestling coach named him "Platon" because it means "broad-shouldered", and this name stuck much better that "Aristocles", his original name after his grandfather.[1] Ancient Greece had philosophy and democracy, yes. But its now time-bleached statues were once painted bright colors. Processions of Dionysian revelers sometimes marched through its streets while carrying penises and shouting vulgarities. Alongside the tragedies of Sophocles were the comedies of Aristophanes who wrote about farts and sex. We hearken back to Ancient Greece for its philosophy, high art, and conquests, but not much else. For whatever reason, we rarely tend to the lighter side of life in history and academic thought. I think this is a mistake. It neglects a huge part of human life.[2] This is especially a problem for philosophy because it takes itself as "footnotes to Plato." But few allow Plato temperamental complexity and

[1] Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, trans. C. D. Yonge (London: George Bell and Sons, 1901), iii.5, p. 114. Diogenes is not always the most historically accurate writer, and some contemporary scholars dispute his account of Plato's name. See, for example: James A. Notopoulos, "The Name of Plato," *Classical Philology*, vol. 34, no. 2 (Apr. 1939): pp. 135-45. It is funny that Plato, the wrestler, was never tried for crimes against the State, nor did Athens try to execute him, fates his teacher, Socrates, and his student, Aristotle, both met.

[2] For example, when Plato bans unjust poets from the καλλίπολις, it seems heinous. But considering what Greece was like and how all its citizens attended festivals that hosted tragedies and comedies, the criticisms gain plausibility. Poetry then was as popular as television today. For a recontextualizing of Plato's criticism of poets, see: Alexander Nehamas, "Plato and the Mass Media," *The Monist*, vol. 71, no. 2 (Apr. 1988): pp. 214-34.

human crudity. Footnotes to Plato differ when they are attached to texts written by an alabaster statue rather than a flesh-and-blood, battle-tested, joke-loving man in a cosmopolis.

But this dissertation is not about Plato, though the points about Greek culture hold. Instead, this dissertation summarizes and extends the ideas of Plato's most famous student: Aristotle. I choose Aristotle because his version of virtue ethics is more complete than Plato's, and Aristotle's theory became relevant to contemporary ethics when a group of women philosophers—Philippa Foot, Rosalind Hursthouse, and Martha Nussbaum—revitalized his approach.[3] I will not defend neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics as the best theory to hold. But I will show how it can handle subtle subjects like play and playfulness. And I invite ethicists of other persuasions to add to my discussion.

This dissertation is about taking play seriously. More precisely, it is about the virtue of playfulness. Throughout, I distinguish between **play** (an action) and **playfulness** (a character trait). Nearly no philosophers have written on playfulness as a character trait, which is why I hope to advance a theory of playfulness here. I am concerned less about what constitutes an action of play and more about what things playful people do, on what occasions, and in what ways. This distinction matters because someone can play (do playful things) without being playful (being a person who uses their leisure time in the right ways, in the right circumstances, consistently well across time). This latter phenomenon is what I hope to classify.

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[3] See: Philippa Foot, *Virtues and Vices* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002); Rosalind Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1999); and Martha Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy*, Updated Ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001).

There were other major ethical theories roughly contemporary to Aristotle, such as Epicureanism, Stoicism, and Cynicism. And Epicureanism (if taken as a precursor to hedonic utilitarianism) and Stoicism (after its revitalization by thinkers like Lawrence Bekker and Massimo Pigliucci) has similarly complex histories and contemporary defenders. I wish I had the time to address their potential concerns about play and playfulness.

But when I classify, I do not mean to offer a genus and use differentia, a strategy Aristotle deploys in his *Metaphysics*. Nor do I hope to give precise semantic boundaries for what terms refer to, at least not to the extent that Aristotle does in *Categories*. Both are suitable ways of defining things that can be metaphysically and semantically exact. However, I focus on playfulness's ethical dimensions, and unfortunately, this means that my definitions cannot be as precise as logic, geometry, or even biology. I heed Aristotle's advice on ethics. In ethical work, he cautions readers that truth can be offered only roughly and in outline, and no wise person ever looks for more precision in a subject than it actually allows (*EN* 1094b11-25, 1098a25-33). These theoretical limits constrain only the precision possible in this conversation, not its importance, and they redirect the reader's attention to practical upshots. If what I am saying has no relation to everyday action, my words failed.[4]

So, how do I hope to offer a characterization of playfulness? I use examples and generalized descriptions of phenomena. Aristotle often works from examples, and he conceptualizes virtue as an intermediate state between extremes. For example, courage is facing fear in just the right way, neither being too afraid (as a coward) nor utterly inattentive to fear (as a rash person). Virtue, Aristotle argues, is like aiming for the center of a target. You can look at the extremes to aim between them (*EN* II.9). There are, after all, many more ways of going wrong than right. But this does not deter Aristotle from talking about ethics, and it does not me either. Rather, it makes him attend to the many ways people live worse and better lives, and he distinguishes the alternatives for forming our characters. This is why I will use examples and

[4] Lack of precision does not delegitimize conversations about ethics. After all, how we think about who we are and what kind of lives we want influence how well we live. And everyone cares about that (or so Aristotle assumes, and I do too).

general descriptions of play and playfulness throughout. And I hope that these rough strategies for characterization are good enough to give action-guiding, ethical advice—ways of evaluating the goodness of doing certain things and being certain ways. So, I cannot give precise definitions or exact semantic boundaries, but general descriptions and examples should work well enough for my project.[5]

Aristotle has a dialectical method in ethics, starting with the opinions of others to lay out extant theories. I borrow this sometimes, but I will not hesitate to part with conventional understandings of "playfulness." In fact, my readers would be served by avoiding strict associations of "playfulness" with general frivolity, whimsicality, mischievousness, or participating in games. My definition of "playfulness" will differ substantially from some colloquial uses. However, the payoff is that my characterization will be able to explain normal associations, and it will distinguish between genuine, good types of play and false, bad types. That is, while I begin with conventional ideas and take on the mess of human ethical life, I also want structure and discrimination where possible. I think Aristotle does this too. For example, in *Nicomachean Ethics* he separates the real, virtuous courage from other 'courages,' like the 'courage' of people who overcome fear-inducing situations because they fear public shame more, or like the 'courage' that some soldiers exhibit because they fear what their officers will do to them if they disobey. These mimic courage, but Aristotle argues they are not it. Analogously, there are many things people call "playful" that I exclude.

[5] Should critics find that my imprecision leads to difficulties, I would gladly listen. As Aristotle mentions, I am a friend foremost to truth, over and above my friendship to Aristotle or whatever other theoretical loyalties I start with (cf. *EN* 1096a11-18). I do not want my method—moving ethical conversations toward the messiness of human life and the particularities of people and their narratives—to be a scapegoat for sins of rigor deficiency, something Aristotelians get accused of. But I request, for the goat's sake, that the verdict be saved until the end, when the reader can decide whether I have committed atrocities of laxness.

The many puzzles about play are what lead me back to Aristotle. I hope that by tracing the concept back to Aristotle, I can find a useful starting point for our conversation. **Chapter 1** reviews Aristotle's take on play. Aristotle has a mixed opinion of play. In some ways, it is necessary for human life, as when it helps children develop. It also rests the minds of adults who labor or stress throughout their days. Yet, Aristotle also argues that play is insufficient for a good life, and he derides it venomously when it encourages loose morals. Chapter 1 establishes the ways play gets evaluated ethically, and it connects play to leisure time and psychological rest.

Chapter 2, then, builds on chapter 1's insight that play has ethical stakes. It summarizes the core concepts of Aristotelian ethical theory to evaluate play. Here, I summarize primarily the values of εὐδαιμονία and ἀρεταί.

Many words are difficult to translate, so let me mark some curiosities here. I translate **εὐδαιμονία** in various ways. Most commonly, I render it as "happiness" because it is a common word today, and people still consider the pursuit of happiness worthwhile. But sometimes I choose "flourishing," which emphasizes that εὐδαιμονία takes time and commitment to achieve, and it is something that actualizes a potential in human life being the best it can. "Flourishing" separates Aristotle's actual use of εὐδαιμονία from contemporary tendencies to view "happiness" as an acute, emotional state. No doubt, flourishing entails positive emotions and moods, but it cannot be reduced to them; it is more an accomplishment of a person cultivating well her whole self and living her entire life well. "Happiness" and "flourishing" will be synonymous for me, but I switch between them to emphasize different aspects of εὐδαιμονία.

Similarly, I render **ἀρετή** (plural: ἀρεταί) in various ways. Most often, I render it as "virtue" since this word captures the positivity of developing a good character. Sometimes I choose "excellence" because it emphasizes the activity of forming good character, in that a

human must perform tasks well and over time to develop ἀρεταί. Virtues take work to develop, and they always benefit their possessors' lives. Or, so Aristotle argues (and I assume). "Virtue" and "excellence" are synonymous, but (again) they emphasize different aspects.

Relatedly, sometimes I discuss "character traits", which technically apply to both ἀρεταί (virtues) and κακαί (vices). There is a sprawling contemporary literature on virtues, vices, and whether they exist.[6] But unfortunately, I do not have space to summarize it. "Character traits", for me, are aspects of our personality that must be trained and engrained, and once fully developed, they are hard to change, like habits. They also dispose us to act according to those traits whenever circumstances present opportunities. So, if you develop the trait of courage, you will face any fear-eliciting circumstance well, no matter the domain of life. These definitions lead to many psychological debates, but I hope my conversation here avoids them. The focus is not on reconciling the conflicting psychological and philosophical theories about happiness, virtue, or habits; rather, I focus on offering a way to organize observations about playfulness.[7]

A last note on my language: I use "ethical" and "moral" synonymously. Both terms refer to wide-scope character traits and flourishing, and any evaluation of a person's actions must always be contextualized within a person's narrative and her particular socio-historical circumstances and interactions with specific institutions. Obligations hold in a practical sense, as ethical obligations are what a person should do to develop herself virtuously and achieve

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[6] For extended contemporary treatments of character, see: Christian Miller, *Character and Moral Psychology* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2014); Mark Alfano, *Character as Moral Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2013); and John Doris, *Lack of Character: Personality and Moral Behavior* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002).

[7] I am committed to the theory that playfulness is a moral, global character trait. But, even if it is something else (perhaps a local, aesthetic trait), my analysis should be useful. Few people have addressed playfulness in any respect, so I hope that, if I am wrong, my errors provide a productive foil.

happiness given her particularities. So, I am collapsing the "moral" into the "ethical."[8] Chapter 2 lays out the basic components of the concepts noted here. But it does not defend them, as each would require book-length treatments.

Chapter 3 lays the last piece of the foundation by addressing the topic of play and the many ways people discuss it. But instead of addressing the works of other philosophers, chapter 3 builds on the life and social sciences. This chapter makes the point that play helps individual organisms to develop psychological skills to cope with stress and learn about the world. In social animals, it also helps organisms to bond with each other and communicate optimal ways of performing different actions. Yet while these points apply to humans, humans are more complicated, and research from non-humans must be contextualized. This is because humans use values in play. It happens in the games of children, who imitate social roles, and it happens in the playful actions of adults in spaces like cafes and taverns, where people can come together during leisure time to exchange ideas and culture. Humans, especially, use reason and complex sociality to play, and there is no non-human analogue. Human play shares some characteristics with non-humans, but it seems inextricable from ethical and political values. Chapter 3 thus surveys some empirical work to talk about play's many dimensions.

Chapter 4 is the most important chapter of the work, as it sets out my theory of playfulness. The critical and curious alike will want to focus here. In neo-Aristotelian fashion, I tie the virtue of playfulness to a sphere of life: leisure. And I argue that **playfulness helps us to regulate well our leisure time to develop ourselves well**. I also argue that playful people must

[8] I considered replacing every use of "moral" with "ethical," but some phrases sound strange to my writerly ear. A subfield of this inquiry is "moral psychology," not "ethical psychology." Some types of play seem "immoral," not "unethical." To a technically trained philosopher, this nuance matters, which is why I make my terms explicit. But to anyone else, I think some phrases will sound strange. So, for a more readable style with wider associations, I have chosen to avoid the awkwardness that lexical precision might require.

be serious, creative, humble, and optimistic. They should also avoid being flaky, severe, rigid, unruly, fragile, and reckless. This theory hopefully shows the ways playful people use their leisure time to become better and pursue happiness. Playfulness involves the various facets of an Aristotelian virtue—right thoughts, emotions, and motivations; and right action, manner of execution, and social awareness. Some critics might be concerned that this theory makes too much of playfulness or renders certain things playful that should not be. However, I hope that my theory identifies the sphere of life that playfulness interacts with and gives a way of distinguishing between good and bad play. I hope it explains the jumbled data on play by contextualizing playful actions in the life of a playful (or unplayful) person. Other critics will worry that my characterization of playfulness ignores malicious things in play. But here, again, I appeal to Aristotle. Playfulness, by definition, is ethical. But there are unethical pseudo-playfulnesses too.

Because examples are spurious throughout, I use **Chapter 5** to clarify and extend my thoughts on playfulness. There, I address three questions about playfulness: whether my theory is too broad, whether boredom poses any danger to my theory, and whether my theory of play implodes under the ethical obligation to flourish. My answers try to balance the many concerns. I argue that my theory best captures examples in a helpful way, that some types of boredom are normal but others are indicative of loss of meaning and social connection, and that there is always an unavoidable obligation to live well but this is not something that should weigh someone down. I hope these examples clarify playfulness, but I hope more that they show how many puzzles there are for future research.

Play and playfulness involve much more than games or sports. Ancient Athens proves this too. Politicians used festivals, spectacles, and athletic contests to win favor from citizens and

non-citizens, and they used the luxurious prizes paid to competitors as ways of publicizing their wealth. Olympian victors in the most popular events won $700,000 for first place, and Panathenaic winners received $130,000-worth of olive oil. This extravagance was not despised by the lower classes either; they identified with the diligence and endurance of the athletes, reminding citizens of their times rowing warships or workers of their labor during their crafts. Sometimes these athletes used their fortunes and reputations to enter politics, and sometimes they were executed or ostracized for opposing tyrants, as with Kallias, son of Didymias. What gets lost in many histories, though, is that many of the athletic festivals, for example the Panathenaic ones, included religious processions, public performances of theatre and music, and closing ceremonies that used animal sacrifices for large feasts. In the rituals of play, the ethical and political mixed, and the soul was never neglected for the body. In fact, philosophy's most prestigious schools—Plato's Academy and Aristotle's Lyceum—were gymnasiums built for training athletes and citizens long before they housed the lectures of philosophers.[9] This plethora of activities hints at one important thing: leisure impacts life profoundly, and there are many ways of using it. Playfulness, for me, is the way of sorting the good from the bad in such a diverse sphere of life as leisure. Why, then, do we not talk about play more often? And more pertinently, why do we not care about leisure and playfulness—who plays, the ways they play, and what makes some types of play ethical or just? I will not offer any psychological explanations for the neglect of these questions in philosophy, but I will offer an experimental treatment in this dissertation.

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[9] Donald G. Kyle, *Sport and Spectacle in the Ancient World*, 2nd ed. (West Sussex: Wiley Blackwell, 2015), esp. ch. 8 and 10. The Pythian Games deserve special mention too. In tribute to Apollo, they included competitions for songs, instrumental music, acting, dancing, and painting. I owe Scott Aikin for this reference.

To see the contemporary relevance of my questions and the ways the Athenians are similar to us, one need only consider millionaire athletes, like LeBron James, and their impactful projects, like James' I Promise School which gives its students free bicycles, meals, and college tuition after they graduate. Or, we can consider the high incidences of Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy among NFL players, or their violent offense records. This shows how play affects our abilities to live well. Or, we can examine athletes-turned-politicians like Dwight Eisenhower and Arnold Schwarzenegger to see how play affects who we are and how who we are has political implications. Play affects our lives, and it does not seem to be ethically or politically neutral. So, we need a way of assessing it. I hope to offer one method by arguing that play affects our characters, and that a good life requires playfulness.

Chapter 1

PLAYING WITH ARISTOTLE

Starting with Aristotle

Why start with Aristotle?[10] Part of my answer is mere confession: I am committed to Aristotle's ethical system, especially as developed by neo-Aristotelians like Rosalind Hursthouse and Philippa Foot.[11] I will not argue for why I prefer neo-Aristotelianism to alternatives like Kantianism, consequentialism, or pluralistic ethical systems.[12] I will, however, state this: my admiration for Aristotle's empirical approach to ethics bears on **how** I will investigate playfulness.[13]

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[10] Aristotle's works are the only ones I cite parenthetically according to their Bekker numbers or chapter and section numbers. For convenience's sake, when I quote Aristotle, I will use the translations as collected in: Aristotle, *The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation*, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984). *Cat*. is translated by J. L. Ackrill, *DA* by J. A. Smith, *EE* by J. Solomon, *MM* by St. G. Stock, *EN* by W. D. Ross as revised by J. O. Urmson, *Met*. by W. D. Ross, *Pol*. by B. Jowett, and *Rhet*. by W. Rhys Roberts.

[11] See: Rosalind Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); Philippa Foot, *Natural Goodness* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001) and *Virtues and Vices* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002). Alasdair MacIntyre also deserves mention, but since he has Thomist influences, I have separated him from Hursthouse and Foot. See: *After Virtue*, 3rd ed. (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008) and *Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues* (Chicago, Open Court, 1999).

[12] Christine Swanton, for example, integrates insights from Aristotelians, Kantians, Nietzscheans, and contemporary ethicists and psychologists in: *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003). There has been lots of recent work to show that these camps are more similar than they have been taken historically. For example, see: James P. Sterba, *The Triumph of Practice over Theory in Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

[13] I do not mean to imply that Aristotle is the only empirical ethicists. In fact, I think David Hume relies on many empirical observations in his *Treatise of Human Nature* and *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*. Also, Immanuel Kant, despite critics who claim otherwise, was a keen empirical observer, which is at the heart of his *Metaphysics of Morals*.

Like Aristotle, I am committed to inter-disciplinary, empirical work. Aristotle's method for investigating human behavior, especially in ethics, requires that investigators do more than theorize abstractly.[14] At some point, Aristotelians must try to identify the most flourishing people in their communities and catalog what works in their lives. They look at these same happy people to see which behavioral patterns seem to lead to success in life, and they note what happy people pursue. But they also note what happy people avoid and what makes people miserable. This is why Aristotle, while studying human behavior, advanced many empirical disciplines, such as biology and psychology. Any subject that caught his attention got investigated comprehensively and from many different perspectives, no matter the discipline. So, I borrow this approach from Aristotle, which is why I will integrate biology and psychology in later chapters.[15]

Yet even in borrowing so much from Aristotle, I must supplement his work. Aristotle does not discuss the **character trait** of playfulness, which is my ultimate goal. That is, playfulness is not a virtue for Aristotle, but it is for me. Even so, Aristotle has many remarks on play as an **action**. So, before I can supplement his work, I must explain what he actually says. This chapter examines the unifying themes in Aristotle's remarks on play. Specifically, it addresses three things in Aristotle: etymological connections between "play" and related terms (sec. 2), play's relation to everyday life (sec. 3), and some cautions about play (sec. 4). The

[14] Ethics and metaethics is full of questions about preconditions for action, necessary and sufficient conditions of a value, or ineliminable, essential criteria for identification of a phenomenon. Many neo-Aristotelians deal with these questions. But, at some point, Aristotle would remind philosophers that they need to attend to the facts on the ground.

[15] I also take it as obvious that Aristotle is an influential figure in intellectual history. So, if I can identify something in his work that helps scholars understand the nature of playfulness, the finding will be significant to anyone who cares about Aristotle's work.

chapter closes by summarizing Aristotle's concept of play and some philosophical questions he raises (sec. 5). In short, Aristotle connects play, amusement, and associated pleasures to champion appropriate play and deride vulgar amusement. But his remarks are complex. Far from settling what play is, this chapter introduces questions that my later chapters must answer, especially as I move toward outlining the **character trait** of playfulness in chapter 4.

Connecting Play, Amusement, and Pleasures

Readers might tolerate my admiration for Aristotle and my need to supplement his work. But they may nonetheless wonder why, in a conversation about "playfulness", I include passages on "play", "amusement", "wit", and "leisure." What do these other terms have to do with "playfulness" proper? Here, I must refer to the original Greek by Aristotle. There is an etymological connection between some of these words and a thematic connection between the rest.

The Greek word for "child," παῖς, shares a root with many other words, especially παίζω, which is translated as to "play," "jest," and "invent in a playful spirit."[16] Additionally, παιδιή gets translated as "childish play," "sport," "game," or "pastime."[17] The root for παῖς and the verb παίζω have many associations that translators struggle to render consistently in English. In fact, the root also gets integrated into phrases like διαγωγῆς μετὰ παιδιᾶς (*EN* 1127b34), which Horace Rackham translates as "playful conversation" and Christopher Rowe and W. D. Ross

[16] These are the translations as offered by: *The Pocket Oxford Classical Greek Dictionary*, ed. James Morwood and John Taylor (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 239. But similar entries can be found in: *A Greek-English Lexicon*, ed. Henry George Liddell, Robert Scott, and Henry Stuart Jones, as uploaded to *Perseus Digital Library*, ed. Gregory R. Crane: http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/. It is traditionally referred to as "LSJ."

[17] LSJ.

translate as “amusement.” The original Greek text, therefore, connects “play,” “playful,” “child,” “childish,” “sport,” “game,” “amusement,” and “amusing.” They are all English ways of rendering Greek words related to the root παις.[18]

Aristotle also connects play to discussions about leisure, pleasure, temperance, and wit. For Aristotle, only people who have leisure time can play, and play produces pleasure. (That is, leisure is a necessary condition for play, and play is a sufficient condition for pleasure.) This matters because Aristotle is suspicious of pleasure, and by extension, whatever produces it. He goes as far as to say that pleasure is one of the things we should guard most against in our lives (*EN* 1109b7-12). After all, it is hard to find any person who is deficient in experiencing pleasures (*EN* 1107b6-7; *EE* 1234b8). Rather, most people over-delight in social amusement (*EN* 1128a14), and many people regularly choose pleasures over the health of their own bodies or estates (*EN* 1176b9-11). Play’s connection with pleasure associates it with suspicion. And this suspicion gets diagnosed in conversations about virtues. Specifically, Aristotle’s misgivings about pleasure transition his conversations about play to discussions of virtues like temperance (which is the proper appreciation of pleasures and pains in life) and wittiness (which regulates how we relate to other people and social pleasures).

In Aristotle, play’s etymological connections bind it to amusement, games, and past times. And because play leads to pleasure, play is often treated in the same excerpts that discuss virtues and vices associated with pleasure. Additionally, leisure usually is not far away because it

[18] For this chapter, I will be loose with associations between terms like “play”, “amusement”, “past time”, etc. The Greek does not have sharp enough distinctions to make fine differences. My upshots will not depend on strict semantics.

is a precondition for play. Etymological and thematic similarities connect these seemingly disconnected ideas.[19]

Aristotle on Play's Importance

Because Aristotle's conversations about play overlap with so many others, I have taken the same approach by drawing together conversations on play, leisure, and the virtues that regulate pleasure. When examining Aristotle's remarks on play, there are four consistent themes. First, Aristotle describes play as part of life. Second, he relates play to leisure (which is necessary for happiness). Third, he relates play to pleasure (which is also necessary for happiness). And fourth, he asserts that play elicits an emotion of relaxation in the soul.

Play as Part of Life

Aristotle often tries to save common sense or start with the opinions of previous thinkers and his contemporaries.[20] Proceeding dialectically, he observes that many people think relaxation and play/amusement are necessary for a good life because life includes rest, and rest often includes amusement (*EN* 1127b34-5, 1128b3-4). In fact, the most flourishing people in a community enjoy the pastimes of amusement and take refuge in them (1176b12-13). Consider how friends who get together often play games, tell jokes, and reminisce about good times.

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[19] Jeffrey Tlumak worries that my investigation of playfulness is in danger of missing its target because I equivocate and use my terms without rigorous strictness. I have tried to take this criticism seriously. But Aristotle sometimes slips between his terms, and this topic is undertheorized. This means I must depart from Aristotle's philosophy specifically and philosophical methods broadly. I hope I have eliminated vicious enthymemes, vagueness, and equivocations. But I leave readers to decide for themselves.

[20] For a discussion on Aristotle's dialectic and how to interpret it, see: D. W. Hamlyn, "Aristotle on Dialectic," *Philosophy*, vol. 65, no. 254 (Oct., 1990): pp. 465-76.

Happy people cherish play. Play's presence in the lives of good people establishes its value as more than mere popular opinion; it reveals that play is deeply rooted in a good life.[21] But play's place in life is not just a faithful portrait of Ancient Greece. Play seems ineliminable from life because we all need rest, and we amuse ourselves during this time (1127b34-5).

In fact, Aristotle explicitly argues for play's developmental importance. Aristotle implores parents, caretakers, and politicians to preserve play in the lives of children. He argues that children under the age of five years-old need to avoid both labor and study, and that they instead should fill their time with play. He also warns that people should never stop children who cry and scream because both behaviors are crucial to childhood development (*Pol*. VII.17). In these remarks, he places developmental, ethical, and political value on play. Beyond mere descriptive fidelity, play should be part of life for the young.[22]

Aristotle's remarks on play in *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Politics* show, at minimum, that play is a natural part of life. For children, it facilitates development. For adults, it helps rest, and

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[21] The strictness of the relationship between play and a good life can be interpreted in different ways. Play and happiness could be merely coinstantiated (they appear together). Or, there could be a causal relationship between them, such as happiness producing play or *vice versa*. Aristotle does little to argue for how strict this relationship is. The only things that are clear in this metaphysical sense are that: (a) play and happiness are not identical (play and happiness are not the same things), and (b) play is often included in the lives of happy people (possible coinstatiation). While I will interpret Aristotle as arguing that playfulness is a necessary condition of a good life, weaker interpretations are possible but too far outside the scope of my project to refute.

[22] An interpreter of Aristotle might argue that Aristotle only means play to be necessary because humans have found no other means to develop the physical, psychological, and social skills that play does. It is a contingency of human civilization to this point that humans learn by playing, but it is not a necessary feature of human development. Given that Aristotle always focused primarily on the world of here and now, I am willing to say that this contingency of play's place in human life is a practical necessity, even if not a logical necessity. Perhaps in a science fiction utopia play will not be necessary for human development. But even so, philosophers like Bernard Suits have argued that utopia would be precisely the place where we could play at most things. So, play would likely reenter the picture there. See: Bernard Suits, *The Grasshopper: Games, Life, and Utopia* (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2014), ch. 15.

it is cherished when reflecting on life. At whatever stage in human life, people should value play, and Aristotle affords it an important place in life that should not be eliminated altogether.[23]

Play as Part of Leisure

Aristotle's remarks about play are usually related to leisure, which is itself necessary for a full, flourishing human life (*EN* 1177b4-5).[24] Without leisure, people cannot develop capacities for reflection, creativity, or political involvement. And without these capacities and activities, people cannot be considered truly happy. Aristotle repeats throughout *Politics* that, while humans must work to secure goods necessary for living (e.g. food, shelter, and social coordination), leisure is better than toil, and leisure is the goal of all toil (*Pol.* VII.3, 1334a14-20, 1333b1-2). He argues this most poignantly when claiming that leisure is the first principle of all action (*Pol.* 1337b31-33). According to Aristotle, we do all things for the sake of the leisure that comes from our actions.

But why should Aristotle argue so strongly for the importance of leisure? The reason that people should strive for leisure is that leisure itself is necessary for producing happiness and enjoyment of life, and the busy person who lacks leisure faces challenges in being happy or enjoying life (*Pol.* 1338a1-4). People need time to dedicate to whatever they like. Without it, people cannot develop mental capacities for creativity or social relationships where people are

[23] Psychiatrist and researcher Stuart Brown argues that humans are the most neotenous animals on Earth; humans retain immature qualities into adulthood, and they remain youthful, flexible, and plastic. "Play Is More Than Fun," filmed May 2008 at the Art Center Design Conference. *TED Video*, 26:42, https://youtu.be/HHwXlcHcTHc.

[24] Aristotle argues that one's leisure time should be spent in contemplative activity like philosophy (*EN* 1177b4-15ff). Leisure itself will not consecrate any activity that a person chooses to perform during that time; rather, Aristotle has in mind that certain activities, especially those more related to the higher human function of reasoning, are better for someone than any other alternatives.

interested in each other for no other reason than they appreciate one another. And losing these opportunities for mental and social development severely undermines whatever political coordination and communal goods one can contribute or experience. Aristotle writes, "To be always seeking after the useful [χρήσιμον] does not become free [ἐλευθερίοις] and exalted souls [μεγαλοψύχοις]" (*Pol*. 1338b2-4). Human life is about more than mere utility or connecting every action to a direct purpose. The best kinds of people do more than work; they value their leisure.[25]

Leisure's importance transcends an individual person's needs; leisure is also vital to communities. Aristotle argues that leisure (and peace) ought to be the goals of all military measures (*Pol.* 1334a3-5). In fact, the goodness of citizens, rulers, and states can partially be measured by how much leisure time they have and what they do with that time (*Pol.* II.9, 11; IV.6; VII.5, 9). Good states will allow as many of their people to flourish as possible, and its rulers and active citizens need leisure to cultivate intellectual capacities to help them to organize and rule society more justly. So, not only do philosophy and happiness depend on leisure, as many scholars often cite; justice depends on leisure as well.

The importance of leisure in life matters for play. We need leisure to live well. And since play should not be eliminated from life altogether and play can happen during leisure, it follows

[25] As will become apparent in later chapters, leisure time does not mean there are not goals and that the time is not used seriously. Aristotle here is contrasting leisure with activities where there is a necessary goal and mortal pressure. For example, I must work so that I can eat because if I do not eat, I will die. That is a social and biological set of necessities that force me to spend my time in a specific way. Contrast that with: I must write my short story because I really want to see if I can do it, and I wonder what my friends will think of it. Writing something and sharing it take commitment, and they cultivate skills in the author. (So, it is not about effort or using activities for other purposes.) But these things are not necessary in the sense Aristotle is addressing here. He is worried about people who always work or fill up their time with only economic and practical concerns. People like this do not often allow themselves time enough to develop new skills or relationships. And people seriously stressed by biological and social needs cannot rest or develop themselves in innovative ways.

that at least part of leisure should be spent in amusement. The best human lives include leisure, and play can be at least part of that leisure time. Aristotle, however, does use the virtues to specify which types of play are appropriate.

Play, Temperance, and Wittiness

Play can be part of a flourishing human life, and it occurs during leisure, which is necessary for happiness. These are weak connections between play and Aristotle's values of virtue and flourishing. He never argued that playfulness is a virtue, nor did he directly claim that play is a necessary part of flourishing, though we see how it might be. However, when reading Aristotle's discussions on virtues related to pleasure, a stronger connection between play and his ethical values can be established. Play is associated with pleasure, which connects to many virtues necessary for living well.

Aristotle observes that play is pleasant for two reasons. First, he acknowledges that play is pleasant because it lacks compulsion: "Hence ease [ῥαθυμίαι], freedom from toil [ἀπονίαι], relaxation [ἀμέλειαι], amusement [παιδιαὶ], rest [ἀναπαύσεις], and sleep belong to the class of pleasant things; for these are all free from any element of compulsion [ἀνάγκην]" (*Rhet*. 1370a12-15).[26] Because play lacks forcible constraints or demands, it feels pleasant to the person who plays. Because you **do not need** to play, play feels good.[27]

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[26] Aristotle's remark at *Rhet*. 1370b31-1371a8 seems also to imply that if a person is forced to play, it cannot be pleasurable. Something about compulsion and bringing an action under the purview of necessity removes the pleasure. Whether or not this transforms the playful event into something else (e.g. non-play or work) is unclear.

[27] Bernard Suits defines play as an autotelic activity where a player takes resources that are used toward other ends (be they objects or energy) and uses them to play for the play's sake. For this reason, he also thinks it is possible for professional athletes who 'play' games for money not to be playing at all when they are actually focused on the instrumental end of making a paycheck or winning a game. "Words On Play," *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport*, Appendix I: Presidential Address, vol. 4, iss. 1 (1977): pp. 117-31.

Second, Aristotle argues that play, games [ἀστραγαλίσεις], and contests (both combative [μαχητικὰς] and intellectual [ἐριστικάς]) are pleasant because they present an opportunity for victory (*Rhet*. 1370b31-1371a8). Aristotle argues, "Victory is also pleasant, and not merely to the competitive but to everyone; the winner sees himself in the light of a champion, and everybody has a more or less keen appetite for being that" (*Rhet*. 1370b31-4). Play and sports are pleasurable because they present an opportunity to win, and everyone likes being a winner, or at least entertaining the thought. So, play's potential for victory makes it a pleasurable experience.

It is important to note that play can also involve things that do not have victors or goals. Aristotle includes silliness [γέλως] in the class of pleasant things too, which can be exemplified in a person, words, or actions (*Rhet*. 1371b35-1372a1). Play can be associated with structured games and contests, but it can also take a more generalized form like joking and or evoking laughter and enjoyment.[28]

Because play is a pleasure, it would be regulated by Aristotle's virtues that deal with pleasures: temperance, wittiness, and friendliness. Temperate people virtuously regulate the pleasures that they experience as individuals, for example while eating, drinking, or having sex.[29]

Aristotle's remarks on play also raise the question of whether practice or rehearsal can be pleasurable. Both seem necessary for certain types of play. And this necessity threatens to undermine the freedom of play. However, this pitfall can be avoided if we interpret Aristotle as restricting "necessity" here to economic or biological necessity. As long as they are not needed to survive in an immediate sense, practice and rehearsal can be play.

[28] In the strictest sense, Aristotle does not argue for silliness as a subtype of play. The discussion in *Rhetoric* I.11 is about the class of pleasant things, which is much wider. However, given Aristotle's associations of silliness with men, words, deeds, and art, he implies that play is not constrained to games or contests.

[29] Aristotle also includes under temperance a sub-category of softness and endurance. He talks especially about the "soft" person [μαλακός], who can neither endure pains nor resist pleasures that most people can (*EN* 1150b16-17). In *EN* VII.7, Aristotle carefully distinguishes different ways of pursuing too many pleasures. The impetuous [προπέτεια] and the weak [ἀσθένεια] differ considerably. Impetuous people rush toward any pleasure without deliberation; whereas, weak people deliberate but are overcome by passion or desire. This careful attention to the sub-species of temperance further proves that Aristotle is especially concerned with regulating pleasures in a good life.

People who enjoy too many pleasures are self-indulgent, while those who enjoy too few are ascetic. Neither the ascetic nor the self-indulgent can flourish.

Also, witty people virtuously regulate social pleasures, or how people relate to each other by talking and joking, both about themselves and others. People who enjoy no social pleasures are boorish, and those who try to make every interaction pleasurable are buffoons. Both boors and buffoons botch social interactions, which closes off goods, experiences, and social connections that help people to live well.[30]

Lastly, friendly people can virtuously regulate the pleasures of life in general. People who experience no social pleasures in life in general are quarrelsome, surly, and unpleasant, while people who turn all general social interactions into feel-good events are obsequious or flatterers. Neither the surly person nor the flatterer can do the delicate work of developing friends, who sometimes need scorn and sometimes support (*EN* II.7, VIII). And in the long, strenuous activity of striving for a flourishing life, we need others to help us. So, people who cannot make friends will not flourish.

The three virtues that regulate pleasures—temperance, wittiness, and friendliness—bear on play because of play's inextricable tie to pleasure. That is, play produces pleasure, and pleasure must be regulated by a virtue in order to live well.[31] Therefore, play must also be regulated to live well, whether in playing by ourselves, with our friends, or in public arenas.

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[30] Something I leave unaddressed in wit is the discussion of taking a joke. For Aristotle, witty people not only make jokes in conversation, sometimes at the expense of others and themselves, but they also listen to and tolerate jokes made at their expense. A witty person can fail to be witty if she takes too few jokes or if she accepts every joke about herself. A witty person makes jokes, takes jokes, and also shuts a situation down if things seriously harm anyone's honor. Aristotle offers the advice that, when figuring out what the witty thing to do or say is, one should aim to amuse the perfectly witty person, not necessarily one's audience (*EN* 1128a1-2, *EE* 1234a5-23).

[31] Aristotle's views seem to imply that there are no non-moral pleasures. That is, all pleasures must be evaluated by whether they contribute to virtue or happiness.

Play and its associated pleasures will change their ethical value depending on who does them in which situations for whatever reasons or feelings. Play should not serve self-indulgence, buffoonery, or flattery. And the ascetic, boorish, and surly will neglect play to their own detriment. But play can help someone who understands pleasure's role in life, feels good about appropriate pleasure, and finds proper occasions for it. The action of play is not morally neutral, as its connections to pleasure make it matter. Play can serve both good and bad ends.

Play as Relaxation

The final point I wish to make in this section is one of the most unique things about proper play in Aristotle's remarks. He argues that it can help tired and stressed people by evoking relaxation. Aristotle writes:

> Play [παιδιαῖς] is needed more amid serious occupations [ἀσχολίαις] than at other times (for he who is hard at work [πονῶν] has need of relaxation [ἀναπαύσεως], and play [παιδιὰ] gives relaxation [ἀναπαύσεώς], whereas occupation is always accompanied with exertion and effort), we should introduce amusements [παιδιὰς] only at suitable times, and they should be our medicines [φαρμακείας], for the emotion which they create in the soul is relaxation [ἄνεσις] and from the pleasure we obtain rest [ἀνάπαυσις]. (Pol. 1337b37-1338a1)

This excerpt argues that people who work hard or attend to serious matters are most in need of play because play offers relaxation and rest.[32] But as opposed to relaxation and rest being something needed solely for the recovery of one's body, Aristotle attributes rest and relaxation as emotions of the soul of the person who has played or been amused. That is, play has more than

[32] While I do not have space to defend the claim here, this implies that any profession that practically eliminates leisure and play prevents its members from flourishing. Some industries have tried to prevent this. For example, Goldman Sachs limited their intern hours to 17 hours per day after Bank of America Merrill Lynch intern Moritz Erhardt died of an epileptic seizure that might have been triggered by working 72 hours straight. Rupert Neate, "Goldman Sachs Restricts Intern Workday to 17 Hours in Wake of Burnout Death," *The Guardian* (17 June 2015): https://www.theguardian.com/business/2015/jun/17/goldman-sachs-interns-work-hours . Also, medical residents in the United States are generally limited to working 80-hour weeks, averaged over a few weeks. It is not clear whether these guidelines are adhered to. But industries are taking notice. And, morally speaking, they ought to be held accountable.

somatic effects; its core effects are on the players' psychology, allowing them to relax and rest from toil. And this relaxation has a therapeutic quality. This psychological connection deepens Aristotle's remarks about play's indispensability in life, and it connects play to the adult world of toil and serious affairs.

Aristotle's Reservations about Play

Aristotle thought it important to discuss play due to its prominence in everyday life and its relevance to virtues relating to pleasures. Play clearly has an important place in the development of children and the recovery of adults from labor. However, Aristotle had significant reservations about play. In this section, I address two sets of his concerns. First, he placed many constraints on play, especially for children. And, second, he argues explicitly that play is insufficient for flourishing.

Proper Play

Despite Aristotle's defense of play for children under five-years-old, he did not think all types of play were acceptable. For example, he argued that the play should not be base or servile [ἀνελευθέρους], laborious or painful [ἐπιπόνους], or undisciplined or loose [ἀνειμένας] (*Pol.* 1336a29-30).[33] Building on this, he says that play should also exclude indecent speech and

[33] The terms at *Pol*. 1336a29-30 are difficult to translate, so I have offered some rough synonyms instead of quoting a specific translator. Benjamin Jowett offers "vulgar," "tiring," or "effeminate." Horace Rackham offers "unfit for freemen," "laborious," and "undisciplined" in *Aristotle in 23 Volumes*, vol. 21 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), as uploaded to Perseus Digital Library, http://perseus.tufts.edu/. Especially in the word ἀνελεύθερος, Aristotle distinguishes proper play of freemen and citizens from the base, vulgar play and amusement of slaves and commoners. This point is stressed when Aristotle warns that children should be left as little as possible with slaves because slaves misbehave, and children can pick up those same bad habits (*Pol*. 1336a39-41). It is impossible to erase the social implications these terms had for the audience in ancient Greece. But these nuances are far afield for the present project.

pictures. Casually saying shameful things leads to shameful action, so children especially should be forbidden from such vulgarities. And even freemen or elders who transgress propriety should be beaten, shamed, and degraded because their behavior merits such reactions (*Pol*. 1336b8-12). Play is not a neutral, unconnected realm of human activity. It affects habits, and it is done with people you need respect and help from. Play's connections to individual and social development mean it must be appropriate.

Moreover, the constraints apply to more than the speech and action of children; they also apply to the stories children should be allowed to hear while at play. Stories, Aristotle claims, prepare the youth for life and set expectations, so immoral art trains them incorrectly. Aristotle emphasizes this when he argues that young people should not go to comedies or iambis until they can sit at public tables and drink strong wine, which is the age by which their education has habituated them to the point that it can guard them against the bad influence [βλάβης] of such art forms.[34] Aristotle observes that we like what we know first. So, we should keep kids away from badness, vice, and hate such that they avoid bias in favor of the immoral (*Pol.* VII.17).[35] The positive experiences associated with play should not be attached to unsavory things.

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[34] It is important to remember that Greek comedy is different from the reverent attitude many Americans have toward Ancient Greece. People might read, if anyone, Plato and Aristotle, or maybe Homer and Sophocles. But most do not read Aristophanes or about Dionysus. This means we forget that Aristophanes repeatedly makes fart and poop jokes in *Clouds*, and the plot of his *Lysistrata* is that women are trying to end the Peloponnesian War by withholding sex. Also, cults of Dionysus were strong in Greece. Artwork depicted him and related characters like Priapus with huge, red erections, and there were often parades where worshippers adorned and carried around penises. This helps make sense of Aristotle's remarks about obscenity.

[35] Contemporary psychology also supports the power of first impressions with its studies on the focusing effect, anchoring effect, and similar cognitive biases that show that people will make decisions based on the first piece of information they have. See: Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman, "Judgment under Uncertainty: Heuristics and Biases," *Science*, New Series, vol. 185, no. 4157 (27 Sept. 1974): pp. 1124-31; and Dan Ariely, George Loewenstein, and Drazen Prelec, "Tom Sawyer and the Construction of Value," *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization*, vol. 60 (2006): pp. 1-10.

The upshot of Aristotle's passages is that play is important for life, but it also has the potential to habituate children and adults in ways that will detract from their moral lives. Play affects individuals and their psychological development, and it can also change social dynamics. Play matters, but it matters just as much **how** people play. If the play is base, laborious, or loose, it harms our moral character and our relationships.[36] We need to play, but this need creates responsibility to play **well**.

Play as Insufficient for Flourishing

Aristotle's second set of critical comments argues that play, as important as it may be, can never be sufficient for flourishing. One argument he gives for this point begins with an observation: witty people are deeply valued by tyrants, who like to keep them in their company and dedicate ample time pursuing their amusements.[37] Yet the playful despot's life is not complete, if he does not develop himself well or pursue the right goods, no matter how much he plays or has playful people around him. In fact, Aristotle warns that fortunate and wealthy people, who are afforded much leisure and many goods, are in special need of justice,

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[36] Aristotle's remarks on restriction of access to art continue in a long tradition of Greek thinkers who call into question the public role of gods, athletes, and poetry. Xenophanes, for example, deplored that athletes held greater esteem than sages in the ancient world, and he found it ridiculous that Greeks would worship Olympian gods who are immoral, full of human flaws, and fragmented in their principles. See: Patricia Curd, ed. *A Presocratics Reader: Selected Fragments and Testimonia*, trans. Richard D. McKirahan and Patricia Curd, 2nd Ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2011), pp. 31-8. Most famously, Plato bans poets from the καλλίπολις because artists portray factual inaccuracies about their subjects, glorify the immorality of gods, and train the souls of citizens in bad ways. Plato, *Republic*, trans. G. M. A. Grube, rev. C. D. C. Reeve, in: *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997), bk. X.

[37] If we judged the importance of play by what tyrants do, it would stress playful pleasures as vital. But, Aristotle admits, the fact that despots value play indicates little about the value of play itself. Just as boys value different things than men, good people value different things than bad people. So, it is not enough to generalize based on the experience of despots or various rulers; one must also consider the quality of the judge (*EN* 1176b14-25). Despite whatever political advantages play, amusement, or wit provide, Aristotle quickly refocuses the conversation by saying that flourishing does not require being a tyrant or having all the goods that a ruler does. Flourishing as a human is open to people who are not rulers too.

temperance, and philosophy to avoid insolence (*Pol.* 1334a26-35). These remarks indicate that the context of play in a person's moral life matters. Play, even if it can help us to relax and give us pleasure, cannot make us good enough people to actualize all of our psychological, ethical, and civic capacities, nor can it alone help us to manage the competing goods of life.

Aristotle observes that there are people who play and experience amusement but whom no one would consider happy. For example, slaves can enjoy amusements, but it cannot be said that slaves are happy (*EN* 1177a2-10).[38] Slaves, for Aristotle, are a counterexample to the claim that, as long as people can play, they can be happy. So, while we do not need to be despots or rulers to be happy, we also cannot be happy if we are slaves, even if we play.

It is crucial to consider why we do what we do. For Aristotle, human actions need a goal or a purpose. Aristotle found absurd that people would intentionally suffer merely for the sake of amusement (*EN* 1176b29-30). That is, play and amusement do not seem like worthy goals of our self-discipline, personal development, and sustained labor in the face of challenges that come from our commitments to our values. He denounces play as the goal of action (or the purpose of work) calling such a view foolish [ἠλίθιον] and childish [παιδικόν]. He agrees with Anacharsis

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[38] The point that a slave cannot be happy is something that distinguishes Aristotle from other ancient ethical traditions. Flourishing, for Aristotle, takes more than individual dispositions and activities; it also includes goods and social relationships. Flourishing is thus dependent on many external things. It makes flourishing, or happiness, uniquely fragile and dependent on good moral luck. For a sustained discussion on this topic, see: Martha C. Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy*, Updated Edition (Cambridge; Cambridge University Press, 2001).

By contrast, Stoicism allows that, as long as people train their minds well enough to live rationally and in accordance with the order of nature, they can flourish. If people realize that the primary things under their control are their thoughts, emotions, and desires (and that their body, relationships, and property are not under their control), they can begin to train their mind to react the best humanly possible to whatever mis/fortune they face. Flourishing for the Stoics is not dependent on external goods, or even one's own body. See: Epictetus*, The Handbook*, trans. Nicholas P. White (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1983), esp. sayings 1, 5, 8, 17, and 32. For a sustained comparison of views of flourishing in the ancient world, see: Julia Annas, *The Morality of Happiness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

who says that people play so that they can work later, not the other way around (*EN* 1176b32-3). These remarks imply that play is not an intrinsically good thing; rather, play serves the end of more serious efforts because it allows someone to rest to return to work later.[39]

Aristotle's comments on play connect how we spend our leisure time and what the goal or meaning of life is. We need leisure, and we use all work to secure it. But we must ask how we should spend our leisure. And if play were the primary thing that we should do with our leisure, then it would be the goal of life and all our efforts. But since this is a ludicrous conclusion to Aristotle, he argues that we should not spend all our leisure in play because it is not the goal of life (*Pol*. 1337b33-6). We spend all our time and effort to gain leisure time. And to Aristotle, it would be a wasted opportunity to spend that leisure time only at play. There are more important things to develop too, such as intellectual, ethical, and civic capacities that help us to live well or make our communities more just. Free time can be used to make ourselves more virtuous, social, and just, not only on play.[40]

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[39] There is a puzzle here about how to square two remarks by Aristotle on play. On the one hand, he says play is pleasurable because it lacks necessity (*Rhet*. 1370a12-15). But on the other hand, he also says that we play so that we can get back to work later (*EN* 1176b32-3). So, in order for play to be pleasurable, we have to pursue it for its own sake in our leisure time. But we do not pursue play or amusement without some other more serious purpose to return to. A player cannot be concerned with necessity, or the play is not play. But the player also cannot forsake serious things altogether, or else the player is childish or foolish. There is also an interesting asymmetry between leisure and play for Aristotle. Leisure is the goal of labor, and even war. But play could never be.

[40] This will be my main departure from Aristotle. I think he is right to emphasize leisure and development of self and community. But I think his notion of play is too narrow, due mostly to him failing to see that play does exactly the things he thinks well spent leisure does. This will inform the core of chapter 4.

Lessons from Aristotle on Play

Aristotle thought it important to address play in *Nicomachean Ethics*, *Politics*, *Rhetoric*, and other works. Play relates to various discussions on flourishing, pleasures, and living in a just society. The picture of play that we get from Aristotle is complicated.

On the one hand, Aristotle argued that play is an ineliminable part of life because it helps children to develop, and it helps adults to relax. It provides therapy to the fatigued mind. And since play is pleasurable, and since life needs pleasures, play can be part of a virtuous, happy life. Aristotle explicitly dismisses lifestyles that have no pleasures as ascetic and boorish, and he criticizes any life that only works and never experiences leisure (as well as any community that demands its citizens always to be utilitarian and never provides its citizens leisure). Aristotle thought pleasure and leisure crucial parts of both flourishing for individuals and justice for communities. Play can be part of a flourishing person's leisure time, and it can be part of the appropriate pleasures that people need to live well in larger communities.

On the other hand, Aristotle also warned against pleasures and play. Certain forms of play are expressly forbidden. If the play is base, laborious, or loose, it can habituate a person poorly and present moral risk for life. Play has its limits in moral life. It is never outside the scope of moral considerations for cultivating the best possible self to lead a characteristically good, human life. People can play, but only if they also develop the necessary intellectual, ethical, and civic capacities to become full, flourishing humans who help to organize a just society. Additionally, while play cannot be eliminated from life because it helps people to develop and relax, it also cannot be the overall goal of life. Play is not the deepest source of happiness; rather, play serves more serious occupations, like resting one to return to work. We

play to gain respite, but we use our renewed minds to attend to deeper matters like cultivating the self and organizing communities.

Aristotle's remarks on play are written as though they simultaneously address multiple groups of critics. He wants to defend the importance of play from Spartan communities that may try to eliminate play, leisure, and silliness as superfluous. His defense of play is an accusation against such groups and lifestyles. But he also places limits on play, arguing against critics that may turn the whole of life into a game or a pursuit of the longest and most durable somatic pleasures. His limitation of play's importance lambasts the wanton, the libertine, and the luxurious. Play serves the mind, the cultivation of character, and the actualization of the best human life and community.

Like human life and ethical values, play is complicated. Like a commitment to values, play is necessary and can help us to overcome challenges present in working too hard or neglecting leisure time altogether. But like deep desires, play needs to be analyzed as both a motivation that can enhance and deteriorate moral life. It seems appropriate, then, that Aristotle calls play a φάρμακον, a "drug," translatable as both "medicine" and "poison."[41]

[41] Jacques Derrida also noted the dual meaning of φάρμακον in: *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981).

Chapter 2

COULD ARISTOTLE TAKE PLAY SERIOUSLY?

Chapter 1 argued that Aristotle judges play as necessary for a good life, but not in all forms. Play changes moral valence depending on how virtuous the players are and what goals it serves. Play is important for childhood development and relaxation from adult occupations. But it cannot be the whole of life, and it should never be loose or vulgar.

Room for Playfulness in Aristotle

Aristotle's nuanced views on play mirror the complexity of his theories of happiness and human psychology. To make the distinctions I need in this chapter, I must explain happiness (εὐδαιμονία) and virtues (ἀρεταί) for Aristotle, which are the subject of sections 1 and 2 respectively. This chapter will address these two fundamental concepts in his *Nicomachean Ethics*. The point here is to lay a foundation of concepts in Aristotelian ethics. This will result in a list of qualities that a virtue of playfulness will need, which will be taken up in chapter 4.

Aristotle does not address playfulness as its own character trait, but I think he could have. So, the concluding conversation in section 3 about playfulness is speculative. My guiding question there is: what requirements would playfulness need to meet to be a virtue for Aristotle? To answer this, I will distinguish between an **activity** like play and a **moral character trait** like playfulness. **Playfulness** is a character trait that a person develops; it is a complex psychological state involving knowledge, emotion, and motivation, and it is displayed in long-term actions that flow from a disposition. Its moral import comes from how it helps people lead good lives. If you

develop good habits relevant to playfulness, you have a better chance of living well. By contrast, **play** is just an action. A person can play without being playful (but a playful person will not refuse to play in appropriate situations). Whether you can play on one occasion indicates little about how well your life is going, so while play can be judged by ethical values, actions of play have lower moral stakes than fully developed character traits, as playfulness.

Even though I will move from strict exegesis of Aristotle to novel application of his ideas, there are good reasons to do this. Aristotle purposely constrained his ethical works in subject and audience, but he left room for addition. He realized that his *Nicomachean Ethics* could not handle every topic for every audience on every occasion. He addressed a limited audience, relying on them to share a common moral education (*EN* 1103b23-5). He constrained his subject to action, remarking that he was unconcerned with systematic rules for deliberation and precise ways to predicate qualities like goodness, thus leaving metaethical questions behind. He was content to offer outlines about ethics because he wanted to understand the ethical phenomena in his community (*EN* 1096b30-2, 1098a26-9, 1103b36-4a6). More important for my project, he often mentions that certain virtues and vices are nameless (*EN* 1107b30-2, 1127a13-9). He realized that people thought certain traits are good and others bad, even though we do not always have words for the traits themselves.[42] From these characteristics of Aristotle's ethical works, I take his system to be open to additions. And his remarks about nameless virtues and vices lead me to think playfulness might fit into the Aristotelian system.[43] But this chapter will

[42] For a discussion of Aristotle's nameless virtues, see: Paula Gottlieb, "Aristotle's 'Nameless' Virtues," *Apeiron*, vol. 27, iss. 1. (1994): pp. 1-16.

[43] If my speculation offends readers as blatantly non-Aristotelian, then I am willing to adopt the label of "neo-Aristotelian" for my project to separate myself from rigorous exegetes.

only concern what makes something a virtue, not whether Aristotle thinks playfulness actually exists.

Happiness and Virtues in Aristotle

Why Happiness Matters

We all want to be happy (εὐδαίμων), or so Aristotle assumes. Unlike Plato, who dedicates the first part of *Republic* to combatting moral skepticism and *real politik*, Aristotle takes it as given that his readers want to live good lives and do good things. Insofar as we are human animals with healthy, functioning minds, we want to be happy (*DA* 425a10, 432b20-6; *EN* 1099b18-9). For him, the central debate about happiness is not whether we want it; we do.[44] The fundamental issue surrounds what happiness is (*EN* I.4-5).

Aristotle surveys the extant views on happiness. Common people hold that happiness is pleasure; it is a life of consumption. Citizens—people who own land and vote—think that happiness is honor; it is a political life reaping the benefits of good reputation. And philosophers think that happiness is something intellectual, belonging to the best parts of our minds and souls. Yet other people think happiness consists in wealth, good fortune, or virtue (*EN* I.5, I.8).

In setting out the available views on happiness, Aristotle does two things: he establishes the importance of happiness and he accentuates happiness's reliance on goods that exist apart

[44] Like Aristotle's argument, mine will not address any critic who does not share the goal of wanting happiness. Defending happiness as morally important is too far outside the scope of this project, as is addressing whether lacking interest in one's own happiness undermines Aristotelian agency and what this may imply for mood disorders and disability in virtue ethics.

from individuals (what I call "external goods"[45]). First, Aristotle avoids questions about whether happiness is important by showing that most people already acknowledge its significance. People have opinions about what happiness is, thus, showing that they care. Additionally, nothing theoretical diminishes the practical importance of conversations about happiness, neither the inherent imprecision in ethico-political debates (e.g. What is the exact definition of happiness?) nor deep disagreements (e.g. Is happiness mostly constituted in honor, money, or virtue?). Whatever the theory, Aristotle emphasizes that some people die pursing happiness, as in the cases of people who incorrectly attribute it to wealth or courage and do whatever they can to get them (*EN* 1094b17-19). What further proof would Aristotle need for the critic who says that these debates do not matter? And even if we cannot prove definitively what happiness is, how can this undermine how relentlessly people pursue it?[46] Aristotle would simply show that some people live well while others suffer due to the paths they have charted on their maps of the good life.

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[45] My use of "external goods" refers mostly to things outside the control of any given person. I follow Epictetus's division that he offers in *The Handbook*, where the things most "internal" to us are our psychological faculties. Everything else—bodily health, other people, money, reputation, etc.—are "external" to someone and, therefore, not wholly under a person's control. Trans. Nicholas P. White (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1983), pp. 11-12.

This is importantly different from another common external/internal division offered by Alasdair MacIntyre in *After Virtue*. There, he distinguishes between goods internal to a practice and external to one. Take the example of the practice of playing chess. There are goods internal to chess, like capturing a bishop or winning a game. But there are also goods external to chess that a person or a community can attach to a practice, like showering a Grandmaster in money, reputation, or power. (Notre Dame, IN: University Notre Dame Press, 2008): pp. 187-8.

[46] Aristotle, of course, never considered the possibility of an error theory about happiness, a view that would hold that happiness does not exist, even though our ordinary discourse earnestly tries to refer to it. He takes the behavioral evidence of people pursuing happiness as evidence that happiness does exist. The skepticism here would come not in being unable to identify anything about happiness; we can say much about it, even if conflicting. Rather, skepticism would have to emerge from disagreement. Aristotle does not take the disagreement to indicate the discourse is meaningless, perhaps as logical positivists might.

Second, in surveying extant views on happiness, Aristotle acknowledges that external goods are important to someone who wants to live a good life. People are limited in what they can guarantee for themselves, and this can make life worse. Without money, people cannot buy goods. Without friends, they cannot socialize, receive help, or pursue complex, edifying projects that require cooperation. And without reputation or power, political goals and large-scale collaboration are impossible. This in no way entails that people must be wealthy, popular, or beloved to the greatest degrees. Rather it laments that the ugly, lonely, and powerless will struggle more in life than the beautiful, beloved, and powerful (*EN* I.5, I.8).[47] If we have access to external goods, it makes life better than if we do not. And these differences in luck affect how virtuous we can be or how happy we can become. Luck affects morality. Life involves luck, and our happiness is vulnerable to misfortune.

By acknowledging the role of external goods, Aristotle concedes partial truth to his opponents. Even if happiness is more than wealth, power, health, or reputation, it certainly involves them and is easier to accomplish with their aid. Aristotle thus runs a somewhat conciliatory program that integrates many views on happiness into his own. But his on-the-ground observation that people already prefer some lives to others allays the attacks of critics who demand theoretical precision when it has no practical impact.

What Happiness Is

[47] For a detailed discussion on happiness and the downtrodden, see: Matthew Cashen, "The Ugly, the Lonely, and the Lowly: Aristotle on Happiness and the External Goods," *History of Philosophy Quarterly*, vol. 29, no. 1 (Jan. 2012): pp. 1-19.

It cannot be overemphasized that "happiness" for Aristotle differs radically from our contemporary, colloquial use of the term. "Happiness" today is often associated with a short-term emotional state of a person, as when feeling happy. But for Aristotle, "happiness" was a long-term accomplishment of an entire life lived well and lacking nothing, as when someone leads a good life. In short, happiness is a life of virtue according to reason (*EN* 1098a18-20, 1099b26-7). For Aristotle, one could feel miserable after illness, divorce, or loss but still be considered happy. This is because happiness transcends mere feeling; instead, it is an ascribed quality of people who have developed themselves in the best possible ways and led full, flourishing, human lives. Happiness is a long-term accomplishment, not a short-term sensation, emotion, or mood.[48]

For Aristotle, happiness is the only purely intrinsic good in life. We pursue it solely based on its own merits and without appeal to anything else. We do not choose happiness because we want pleasure, honor, wealth, or anything else; we choose it for its own sake (*EN* 1097b1-7). Everything else in life, by contrast, is at least partially instrumental, or chosen because it helps to accomplish some other task. Why do we want money? It buys food or security. The money serves some other goal. Why do we want happiness? We just do, and it needs no other justification for its pursuit.[49]

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[48] This separates Aristotle from the Epicureans. The Epicureans hold that pleasure is the best good and pain the worst bad. But for Aristotle, happiness is the best good, in which pleasure and pain can have their places.

[49] To mesh Aristotle with contemporary ethics, I would argue that the intrinsicness of happiness is not as important as its completeness and finality. Happiness, for Aristotle, is the most comprehensive good of all ethical goods, and it is the good at which all our actions aim. Happiness, metaphysically, is distinct due to its completeness, and epistemically, it serves an important deliberative function that can stand behind all considerations in ethical life. These things are more important for his ethical system than happiness being the only proper intrinsic good. Contemporarily, ethicists are comfortable with calling goods both intrinsic and instrumental, even though this did not occur to Aristotle to do with happiness.

Happiness is central to Aristotle's ethics, largely due to its unique qualities. Compared to other goods in life such as wealth, health, reputation, and luck, happiness is the most architectonic (*EN* 1094a15), the highest of all goods of action (1095a15-20), the most complete (1097a30), and the best, most noble, and most pleasant (1099a24-5). Moreover, it does not change with a person's circumstances (1095a20-30,1100b15-1101a10). It belongs to a person alone (1095b26). It is hard to take away (1101a9-10; 1100b20-35), and it is nearly incorruptible once achieved (1100b20-1, b31-3, b35). Happiness is self-sufficient (1097b8; 1177a27), and it is more steadfast and stable than even knowledge (1100b12-14). Happiness is the best of all goods in life, and it is the most durable. It seems of a different sort than money or reputation, and compared to money or reputation, happiness weathers misfortune better.

So how do we achieve happiness? It requires many things. Like plants and animals, people must develop as living entities (*EN* 1098a1-2), and they must perceive and interact with the world around them, often forming desires and moving toward their fulfilment (1098b25 ff). But unlike plants and animals, people must learn to cultivate the self (1099b18-19), act according to reason (1098a13-14), and act according to virtue (1098a18-20). Human happiness relies on mental capacities that non-humans lack (as far as we can tell). Happy people set themselves the life-long project of becoming the best they can to act consistently well. They do this by using their reason to train their emotions, motivations, and dispositions to act virtuously (*EN* I.7-8).

But how do we know that what we are doing is leading to the best development of ourselves? Here, Aristotle grounds happiness in the function of human animals (*EN* I.7). He makes two central claims about human happiness. First, happiness needs to be something distinct [ἴδιον] about humans compared to other living things (1098a1). This rules out nutrition, growth, perception, action, and desire because plants and animals can do these things too. Happiness

certainly includes these things, but none are sufficient for happiness. Human happiness requires something more. Second, in looking for the distinct human function, he wants to find the quality that generalizes to all happy people. He analogizes humans to cithara players. If cithara players can be defined as a group as those who play the cithara well, humans must have some similar function that defines them. His solution to this puzzle: the human good is activity of the mind according to virtue (1098a17-18). And whenever people cultivate their minds to lead a life according to virtue, they fulfil their human function the best and thus lead happy lives. If people develop their minds and create good habits to respond to life's challenges, they live as well as humanly possible.

Happiness, therefore, is not an acquired product or isolated action. It is a deep cultivation of one's capacities to consistently develop the uniquely human attributes to lead a flourishing human life. By living according to reason and cultivating virtues, people have the best chance of achieving happiness, which is living the best life for human animals.

Why We Need Virtues for Happiness

For Aristotle, people want to be happy, and they can be happy only by fulfilling their specific function as human animals: living a life according to virtue (*EN* 1098a18-20,1099b26-7). Virtues, therefore, are necessary components of being a happy person; they are part of what defines a good human, and they are common to all happy people. Those who develop the virtues become better people and lead better lives (*EN* II.7).[50]

[50] For a detailed discussion of virtues benefitting their possessors, see: Rosalind Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1999): ch. 8.

Aristotle is quick to emphasize that the virtues are natural capacities (δυνάμεις). People develop these capacities into actuality through moral education and self-cultivation (*EN* 1103a27-9). But by natural capacities, he does not mean they develop automatically. If people were automatically im/moral, they would be unable to change, and this would confound moral instruction and correction. Yet, just because it takes work to develop virtues does not mean that it goes against some rigid human nature. Training someone to be good is not foolish in a way that training a rock to fall upward is. Aristotle contrasts virtues with our senses. We use sight or smell because we have them, but virtues are things that we have because we use them. Both are natural, but they are developed in different ways. Virtues are developed through proper forms of habituation (*EN* II.1). This comes out especially in the Greek word for virtue, ἀρετή. Not only can we translate it as "virtue" but also as "excellence." Virtues are excellent ways of being, especially with respect to common experiences, situations, and goods that humans interact with.[51]

Human function and natural capacity must remain strongly connected. Happiness is what organizes the virtues. At some point, a critic could ask: how does a non-moral character trait differ from a virtue? Or, what makes for a good habit as opposed to a bad one? For Aristotle, the answer involves happiness. Someone might develop a character trait that disposes her to watch wrestling matches any opportunity she gets. But this character trait does not become a virtue or a vice until it begins to impact how well she can develop her mind and regulate her actions on the way to becoming happy. And it is not immediately clear how a trait of watching wrestlers

[51] Contemporary ethics similarly distinguishes between act-based theories and character-based theories. Broadly, act-based theories ask, "What should I do?" Character-based theories ask, "What kind of person should I be?" Aristotelian virtue ethicists, who are character-based theorists, always contextualize actions in a person's narrative in a specific time and place. For a good discussion of actions and narratives, see: MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, ch. 15.

impacts the virtuous function of human life. Additionally, it does not seem like generalizable advice to all people that, if they want to be happy, they should watch wrestling. Nor do we find an affinity for wrestling among all happy people. Watching wrestlers does not help fulfil the function of human life, and people can flourish without it.[52] The virtues, by contrast, deeply impact whether any human achieves happiness.

Aristotle connects virtues to situations that all humans face. For example, because we all face fear, we need a virtue of courage. Because we all face pleasure, we need a virtue of moderation. Or because we all have access to goods, we need a virtue of generosity (*EN* II.7). Virtues regulate emotions or situations in life that human animals universally face.[53] And happy people needed to develop the virtues to face these situations well. The Aristotelian claim is that our lives are worse if we do not develop the virtues. So, we need the virtues. But trying to understand what someone should do in a situation is difficult. We know we face fear, and we know courage helps us to face that fear well, but how do we figure out how much fear is tolerable or what we should do?

To define virtues, Aristotle employs the mean between the extremes, the spot between excess and deficiency. Aristotle compares calculating how to be virtuous to finding the center of a circle: it is difficult and relies on skill, and there are many ways of going wrong, but by knowing the excesses, we can aim between them to find the center. After all, the center of a

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[52] The tendency to watch wrestling might be connected to the human need to experience appropriate pleasures and pains, and mishandling pleasures and pains can destroy one's happiness. Moderation—a character trait that regulates how well we control pleasure and face pain—is therefore a virtue; whereas, loving wrestling is neither a virtue nor a vice.

[53] Martha Nussbaum points out this same pattern between spheres of life and virtues in: "Non-Relative Virtues: an Aristotelian Approach," in *Moral Disagreements: Classic and Contemporary Readings*, ed. Christopher W. Gowans, (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 168-71.

circle is equidistant from all parts of its boundaries. The analogy places proper development of a trait as equidistant from its malformed extremes. For example, take courage when facing fear. Having no courage, deficiency, will lead to cowardice because someone gives into fear too easily. And having too much 'courage,' excess, will lead to foolhardiness because someone never heeds fear and rushes into hopeless situations. Both too much and too little regard for fear destroy the virtue of courage; excess and deficiency destroy virtue (*EN* II.2). So, in cases where the right thing to do is not obvious, sometimes it helps to consider the wrong things in many different directions to try to find the sweet spot between the extremes of action.

At their most basic level, virtues are dispositions. The Greek word, ἕξις, connotes that a person's disposition is a deep feature of her character and nearly unalterable (contrasting with σχέσις, which is a more easily changeable state). A dispositional quality is something that someone has unflinchingly. This is easiest to see in negative examples, perhaps as with someone who has the disposition of loving alcohol. If fully developed into a disposition, this person will never turn down a drink, no matter if sated or drunk. Part of something being a disposition is that it is a fully developed trait that is hard to undo (or improve upon in more positive cases). Of course, character traits vary according to how developed they are, and they can be stunted or misapplied such that they hinder living well. (And people can have tendencies without having dispositions, and these tendencies can lean toward morally good or bad things.) But once the character trait has reached the level of a disposition, it is set and arduous to change (*EN* II.5, 7).[54]

[54] The difficulty to change dispositions is why Aristotle, and many of the Greeks, stress the importance of moral education. Aristotle says a good education makes all the difference in the world (*EN* 1103b23-5). Talking about the education of children is something that comes up repeatedly in his works, such as when he bans forms of base play because of their influence on children (*Pol.* 1336a29-30).

To form, dispositions require repeated work of a person's entire psychology. They are developed purposely and with intent, and actions flowing from a virtue must be decided by the actor and done knowingly (*EN* 1150a31-5). Virtues are not developed by mere chance or compulsion. Rather, they are developed on purpose and are an extension of a person's agency. Aristotle contrasts virtues with skills (τέχναι). Whereas skills only need knowledge, virtues need knowledge, decisiveness, and consistency. This gets Aristotle around the possibility that someone could become happy or virtuous accidentally. In the same way that someone who inadvertently spells a complicated word correctly is not a scholar, someone who accidentally does something courageous is not a hero. To be courageous, in the Aristotelian sense, is to have decided to develop the disposition to act courageously and to have developed that trait to fullness. A courageous person knows herself and what she can handle. She knows what things in her life and community will most likely inspire fear. She can feel that fear without it overwhelming her, and she does not try to suppress it. She can give an account of why she acts and what she feels when acting. And her life chronicles her psychological development with respect to fear. The fully courageous person is guided by reason but has an intimate familiarity with her emotions and habits. She puts in the work of understanding and developing her whole self.

Feelings and manner of execution matter to virtue too (*EN* 1106b36-7a9). The actor cannot begrudge the right action. People must feel good about doing good things and feel bad about doing bad things. The virtuous are the test of virtues, and it is not enough merely to imitate their actions (though that is how we all begin to develop virtues). Rather, we must also feel the way they feel, and we must do things in the ways they do things (*EN* II.3-4). Buying a newspaper from a homeless person with a hardened heart and an angry thrust of the money toward the

vendor is not generous. A generous person would feel unconflicted about buying the newspaper, and they would treat the vendor with decency and kindness. To be virtuous, a person cannot merely know what to do and execute an action; they must also feel appropriately about what they do and execute the action appropriately.[55]

Playfulness as a Virtue?

So, Aristotle argues that we all want to be happy and that happiness is the distinct human life lived fully and well. It is a life of nutrition and growth, of motion and desire, and of reason and virtue. Each of these things contributes to helping us achieve our human function of life according to virtue. The virtues are just the cultivated natural capacities that bring us closer to happiness when interacting with unavoidable aspects of life. They are dispositions to act knowledgeably, decisively, and consistently, and they are generators of actions that are sensitive to feelings and manner of execution.

But why do happiness and virtue matter for playfulness? Playfulness might be a virtue if I can find a situation that all humans face that is uniquely relevant to play. In other words, if playfulness can help to cultivate capacities in the human mind that are necessary for happiness, then it might be considered a virtue. Without such a connection to the function of humans, playfulness might be a character trait we develop, but it will not be a virtue. Virtues need a strong connection to happiness, and they must benefit their possessors. Additionally, such a trait of playfulness would need to involve knowledge and decision on the part of the actor, and such

[55] While not strictly Aristotelian (i.e. only elucidating the concept of "virtue" from the works of Aristotle), Julia Annas summarizes virtues exquisitely in: "Virtue Ethics," in: *The Oxford Handbook of Ethical Theory*, ed. David Copp (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006): ch. 18.

an actor would need to act consistently, minding both how she feels when she acts and how she executes what she does. Without such nuanced psychological components, people might play or be amused, but they will not be cultivating a virtue. Play as an action can be necessary to a good life without playfulness as a virtue also being necessary. Play is an activity. Playfulness is a disposition which may/not connect to happiness.

Moving forward, then, the questions I must answer are:

1. Does playfulness connect to happiness through affecting nutrition, growth, movement, desire, reason, or virtue?
2. Does playfulness help people to regulate an emotion or face a situation that all people face?
3. Does playfulness exist in all happy people? Can people lead a full, flourishing human life without playfulness?
4. Is playfulness sensitive to knowledge, decisiveness, consistency, and sensitivity to feelings and manner of execution?
5. Are there excesses and deficiencies relevant to a virtue of playfulness?

Working out of chapter 1, we can offer some preliminary answers to these questions. Play, as an action, definitely contributes to developing human capacities for growth, movement, desire, and some forms of reason. Aristotle's remarks about allowing children to play acknowledge this. So, play is important for living well, much as is moral education. But just as moral education is an activity, rather than a virtue, play will need to be connected to something more to become a virtue (recall the wrestling fan example).[56] Play, here, is an action, a one-time event that may occur in different ways or contexts. For play to turn into a virtue, it needs first to turn into a stable disposition to act in certain situations, and the development of such a disposition must

[56] Remember the distinction between an activity and a virtue is that activities are actions that can be one-time events, even if complex. Virtues, by contrast, are dispositions, so they compose our characters and make it likely that we act in certain ways. This is why someone could play without being playful. One action does not amount to a disposition. This distinction also explains how someone who is playful might not play on a given occasion because the disposition might require that the playfulness be expressed in some non-play activity (e.g. practice or social organization).

have an impact on the ethical quality of the possessor's life. Moreover, we need to ask whether the skills and traits that develop via play can be developed by any other means, which would undermine Aristotle's argument that children **need** to play. We must to ask whether humans who do not play are developmentally deficient in some way.

We can also say that play, as an action, helps to rest people. Almost all humans face work and stress. The question here turns into: does play offer a unique or comprehensive way of addressing work or stress (or any other universal situation) without which someone could not live well? Here, again, more needs to be said to show that playfulness as a virtue is necessary for a good life (rather than play as an activity being part of a good life).

Concerning the psychological nature of play, I must also examine the knowledge and feelings of people who play, as well as the manners in which they play. Without a comprehensive effect on a person's psychology, playfulness does not exist as a virtue. Preliminarily, though, we can say that people rely on knowledge of practices to play games, and they have to approach the playing correctly. People must also control their feelings, as those who are enraged, overly-competitive, or unbothered to follow rules cannot play well. People can ruin games through spoil-sport feelings and actions. Moreover, considering the effect of play on someone's life seems to exhibit excess and deficiency. Someone who is excessively playful might not take some situations seriously enough, and someone who is deficiently playful might take all situations too seriously. It seems as though there is a nuanced psychological nature to play that might hint at playfulness. (This is explored in detail in Chapter 4.)

There are no definitive answers in Aristotle about whether playfulness can be understood as a virtue. But if it can be connected to happiness, and if it can meet the requirements of a virtue, it can be added to the Aristotelian canon of virtues. However, even if playfulness is not a

virtue because it fails in some regard, it is important to analyze play as an action. Here, we can distinguish between the ethical permissibility of play to a human life (a human life can involve play, but it is not required to be happy) and the ethical necessity of play (human life must involve some form of play as an action, or playfulness as a virtue, in order to be happy).

Aristotle has provided a foundation for the central questions of this investigation. His remarks on play connect it to human development, especially for children, and they connect play to alleviating stress from work for adults. Additionally, his remarks on happiness and virtue provide a framework for distinguishing play as an action from playfulness as a moral character trait. But since Aristotle here has only provided skeletal hints, I must flesh out this investigation with further data. In the next chapter, I will examine what other disciplines—biology, psychology, sociology, and media studies—have to say on the subject. The goal will be to survey influential views on play to see whether they can meet Aristotle's moral demands on play and his psychological requirements for virtues.

Chapter 3

PRAISE AND SCORN FOR PLAY

Chapter 2 argued that it might be possible for a virtue of playfulness to exist, given both Aristotle's remarks about play and the possibility of yet-to-be-named virtues. But a virtue of playfulness would need to connect a human disposition to a situation that all people face that impacts their abilities to live a good life. To explore this, however, I must first describe the phenomenon I am addressing. I also want to update this Aristotelian conversation on playfulness with developments after 4th Century BCE Greece.

Usually, dropping names annoys readers, but I will do just that to begin this chapter in section 1. I risk this to enforce one point: despite everything written about play, people do not know what to do with it. Everyone is convinced that play is important to discuss and that it is involved in many human activities. But claims about play are grand, and very few offer definitional or ethical constraints on play.[57] Section 1 quickly surveys what scholars have claimed about play.

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[57] There are notable exceptions to avoiding definitions of play. For philosophers, Bernard Suits defines play as "the voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles." Games have goals, and players willingly accept rules that prohibit the most efficient means to those goals just so that they can play. E.g. a golfer's goal is to put the ball into a cup a few hundred yards away, but he does so with a club and without picking the ball up in order to enjoy the challenge of the game. Bernard Suits, *The Grasshopper: Games, Life, and Utopia* (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2014), p. 43. (For a detailed discussion and criticism of the components of Suits's definition, see: Emily Ryall, "Playing with Words: Further Comment on Suits' Definition" in: *The Philosophy of Play*, ed. Emily Ryall, Wendy Russell, and Malcolm MacLean (London: Routledge, 2014), ch. 3. See also: Thomas Hurka, "Games and the Good," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, suppl. vol., vol. 80 (2006): pp. 217-35, as well as John Tasioulas' response, pp. 237-64.)

Biology has a stronger lineage of definitions of play because scientists need careful criteria by which to distinguish playful behavior from other types of behavior in the same animal. And they need to avoid anthropomorphizing or projecting any human qualities or intentions onto the animals they observe. Perhaps the most famous biological definition of play comes from Gordon Burghardt, "Play is repeated, incompletely functional

But the claims about play from the history of thought bother me. Many conclusions rest on assertions, anecdotes, and peripheral remarks. Rather than dedicate time to construct arguments out of the fragments, I will approach play differently by borrowing an Aristotelian strategy in section 2. In *On the Soul*, Aristotle draws a parallel between non-humans and humans. He extrapolates psychological insights about humans from the ways non-humans grow, reproduce, desire, and think. I wish to do the same for play by examining the biology and psychology of non-human play to understand human play. Section 3, however, confesses the limits of research on non-humans when applied to humans, and it emphasizes the uniqueness of human play. I will close the chapter in section 4 with the ethical considerations that brought us to this point. I will argue that the virtue of playfulness helps us to regulate our leisure time, which sets the stage for chapter 4.

A Mosaic of Claims about Play

Play exercises wonderous powers, at least if we believe its evangelizers. Something about the activity of play reveals the deep nature of the player, as well as the mysteries of life itself. For example, philosopher Moritz Schlick argues, "the meaning of existence is revealed only in play."[58] Games scholar Miguel Sicart intensifies these claims by writing, "Play is a form of understanding what surrounds us and who we are, and a way of engaging with others. Play is a

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behavior differing from more serious versions structurally, contextually, or ontogenetically, and initiated voluntarily when the animal is in a relaxed or low-stress setting." *The Genesis of Animal Play: Testing the Limits* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2006), p. 82.

[58] Moritz Schlick, "On the Meaning of Life," trans. Peter Heath, in: *Philosophical Papers*, vol. II [1925-1936], ed. H. Mulder and Barbara F. B. van de Velde-Schlick (Dordrecht, Holland: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1979), p. 115. He adds later: "the meaning of the whole is concentrated and collected, rather, into a few short hours of deep, serene joy, into the hours of play." P. 120.

mode of being human."[59] Old proverbs weigh in too with sayings like, "You can discover more about a person in an hour of play than in a year of conversation."[60] So, thinkers connect the activity of play to meaningful human lives. And play, for some, expresses an important part of human nature.[61]

The hyperbolic claims about play also go beyond individuals and life. Some claim that play is the engine of human civilization and culture. Sociologist Johan Huizinga dedicates *Homo Ludens* to defending one thesis: "For us the whole point is to show that genuine, pure play is one of the main bases of civilization."[62] Historian Steven Johnson echoes this in his book *Wonderland*, "Everyone knows the old saying 'Necessity is the mother of invention,' but if you do a paternity test on many of the modern world's most important ideas or institutions, you will find, invariably, that leisure and play were involved in the conception as well."[63] Between

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[59] Miguel Sicart, *Play Matters* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2014), p. 1.

[60] "You Can Discover More About a Person in an Hour of Play than in a Year of Conversation: Plato? Richard Lingard? Anonymous?" *Quote Investigator*, (30 July 2015): https://quoteinvestigator.com/2015/07/30/hour-play/.

[61] For a different survey of claims about play, see: Randolph Feezell, "A Pluralistic Conception of Play" in *The Philosophy of Play*, ed. Ryall, Russell, and MacLean, ch. 1. Feezell includes quotes by Colin McGinn, such as, "Play is a vital part of any full life, and a person who never plays is worse than a 'dull boy': he or she lacks imagination, humour and a proper sense of value. Only the bleakest and most life-denying Puritanism could warrant deleting all play from human life. . . . Play is a part of what makes human life worthwhile, and we should seek to get as much out of it as we can." He also includes poet Diane Ackerman, who writes, "The spirit of deep play is central to the life of each person, and also to society, inspiring the visual, musical, and verbal arts; exploration and discovery; war; law; and other elements of culture we have come to cherish (or dread)." Lastly, he includes the claims of neuroscientist Stuart Brown, who writes, "I don't think it is too much to say that play can save your life. It certainly has salvaged mine. Life without play is a grinding, mechanical existence organized around doing things necessary for survival. Play is the stick that stirs the drink. It is the basis of all art, games, books, sports, movies, fashion, fun, and wonder – in short, the basis of what we think of as civilization. Play is the vital essence of life." Pp. 13-4.

[62] Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (Kettering, OH: Angelic Press, 2016), p. 5. The title of the book incorporates into the species name for humans the Latin word for "play." In fact, he wants to see human culture as "*sub specie ludi*."

[63] Steven Johnson, *Wonderland: How Play Made the Modern World* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2016), p. 12.

Huizinga and Johnson, play is supposedly responsible for human language, civilization, law, war, knowledge, poetry, mythopoeisis, philosophy, art, fashion, shopping, music, gastronomy, technology, games, and public spaces. The activity of play drives humans to develop culture and institutions that have wide-ranging effects.

Philosophers are not immune to this pattern of exaggerated comments about play. John Wall surveys the history of philosophy to organize philosophers into three camps on play. **Top-down philosophers**—such as Plato, Augustine, Kant, Heidegger, and Gadamer—see play as indicative of childhood, which is vibrant and creative, but also unruly and unreasoned. For them, play must be tamed by rationality, just as children must be civilized by education. By contrast, **bottom-up philosophers**—such as Clement of Alexandria, Rousseau, Schleiermacher, and Derrida—hold that play displays human goodness, authenticity, and spontaneity. For them, the qualities intrinsic to play deserve preservation from childhood onward (rather than taming). Lastly, **developmental philosophers**—like Aristotle, Aquinas, and Maimonides—see play as a neutral activity that can gradually help individuals and groups to grow.[64] So, for philosophers play is a tappable power, unacknowledged drive, or necessary activity.

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[64] John Wall, "All the World's a Stage: Childhood and the Play of Being" in: *The Philosophy of Play*, ed. Ryall, Russell, and MacLean (London: Routledge, 2014), pp. 34-9. The general patterns in the history of philosophy might be useful as heuristics to emphasize discrete aspects of childhood or human development, but each camp neglects something, which Wall discusses. Top-down thinkers are too harsh, and they understate the importance of play for creativity, innovation, and motivation of action. Bottom-up thinkers sentimentalize children and ignore the ways in which they struggle with identify formation and social belonging, none of which are placid or given in childhood experience. Developmental thinkers get the spectrum of development right, evaluating children and adults on a gradient, but they also minimize the qualitative break between childhood and adulthood, as well as the fact that that the sophisticated norms of adulthood are what evaluate children and development. In other words, if all camps read *Lord of the Flies*, top-down philosophers would champion education in response to the savagery, bottom-up philosophers would deny that children are capable of such brutality, and developmental philosophers would skim over the ways childhood seems to be a discrete experience and area for evaluation, treating childhood experiences as mere service for adult goals.

Philosophers and scholars think play is important to address. But they only do so in passing remarks on the way to bigger points, or it is used as rhetorical flourish to praise or scorn the childlike qualities of a subject. Few evaluate play with the rigor or clarity.[65] This review is a mere splash from the sea of ink rained from pens celebrating or deriding play. I could add more, but this section should already show the general patterns of claims made about play, erratic as they are.[66] Scholars argue that play should be restrained or indulged or used in the service of other goals. Play is viewed as a redeemer or a tempter. But little substance buttresses these conclusions. And it is unclear how play gets involved in so many things or why people evaluate it differently.

Play in Non-Humans

Mammalian Play[67]

Instead of spending more time on philosophers and humanists, I want to emphasize a group of neglected voices in the humanities: the scientists who study play. In the biological and

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[65] The omission of detailed analysis of play is unusual because in the history of ideas other activities similarly inextricable from human life—like love, friendship, creating art, or making war—have been analyzed extensively, as have other character traits like courage, moderation, piety, and justice. Additionally, in philosophy games and play often get scrutinized, but playfulness as a character trait does not get discussed much. While I will not offer a strict analysis of play, I will analyze playfulness in Chapter 4. The two are distinct but related, and playfulness is addressed even more seldomly.

[66] I could add excerpts from Plato's *Laws*, Roland Barthes' *S/Z*, Hans Georg-Gadamer's *Truth and Method*, Mikhail Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World*, and Donald Winnicott's *Playing and Reality*. I have chosen to omit these authors because they get discussed often in philosophy, psychology, and literary criticism.

[67] I largely pull evidence from mammals that play, especially rats, dolphins, and primates. Mammals are less mysterious to biologists than many other taxonomic classes. However, there is evidence to suggest that non-mammals also play, as is the case in some birds, reptiles, fish, and invertebrates. Here, though, a host of issues arise, as in how biologists can interpret playful behavior without anthropomorphizing, as well as whether playful behavior evolved once in a primal ancestor or many times over the course of history. For a detailed discussion, see: Burghardt, *Genesis*, chs. 11-14.

behavioral sciences, debates rage about the evolution, function, and benefits of play.[68] In this section, I will survey some of the empirical findings relevant to the importance of play in non-humans, especially those surveyed by neuroscientists Sergio and Vivien Pellis and biologists Patrick Bateson and Paul Martin.

Everything an animal does has evolutionary stakes. A behavior's benefits must have outweighed its detriments to have developed. Play carries a cost. Relative to rest, it uses energy, risks injury, and draws attention to the player. For example, sea lions are more likely to kill and eat young seals when they play. Or lion cubs tagging along on their mothers' hunts may ruin it by play pouncing on each other, making noise, and thus scaring away gazelles.[69] However, despite its risks, play presents opportunities for development. In physical play with objects, peers, or the environment, animals fine-tune their neuromuscular and sensory skills. They learn to use their own bodies in protected situations that simulate complex behaviors. They get to practice navigating their complicated worlds and executing intricate maneuvers. Additionally, in social play, animals learn to compete, co-exist, and cooperate with other kin and other species. They learn to confront, acquiesce to, and collaborate with others to accomplish larger goals. Puppies at play do more than chew toys or annoy their siblings; while playing, they learn how to behave under simulated pressure to hunt and fight, and they learn to pounce, jump, run, and stalk in the terrain around their homes. Additionally, by interacting with other dogs, they learn to recognize their kin, and they learn skills from their peers.[70] Animals can even play pretend to

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[68] For an exhaustive treatment of the biology of play, see: Burghardt, *Genesis*. For a briefer survey of issues in the biology and psychology of play, see: Patrick Bateson and Paul Martin, *Play, Playfulness, Creativity, and Innovation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

[69] Bateson and Martin, *Play*, p. 35.

[70] Two examples of social learning via play: (1) Galapagos woodpecker finches have dispositions to pick up sticks, but they learn from others to stick them into holes to find insect larvae. (2) Bottlenose dolphins in Shark

practice skills, as when chimpanzees cradle, carry, and care for sticks to practice childrearing. So, despite its risks, play teaches animals by facilitating understanding of the self, community, and environment.[71]

Neuroscientists Sergio and Vivien Pellis survey experiments done with rats to defend play's importance. Rats compete to nuzzle each other's napes by attacking, defending, and adapting to each other's advances.[72] This behavior is ingrained in deep parts of the brain, as even rats without the executive functioning parts of the brain play and play fairly.[73] But play is not just prevalent behavior; it is crucial to psychological development. Consider experiments done with animals deprived of play. Rats who did not play in their childhood cannot mate or socialize as well as rats who do play. Play-deprived rats can move and think like other rats when by themselves, but they appear frightened in interactions with others. This prohibits coordination with partners, as they cannot predict or choreograph movements with others. Never mind attracting a mate, play-deprived rats cannot even mount a mate.[74]

Bay, Australia put basket sponges on their beaks to scour the sea floor for prey, a skill passed on from mother to daughter. Bateson and Martin, *Play*, pp. 51-2, 73-4.

[71] Bateson and Martin, *Play*, pp. 14, 23, 29-33, 123.

[72] Sergio Pellis and Vivien Pellis both emphasize that "play fighting" does not resemble "serious fighting" at all. In play, rats nuzzle each other's necks, while in combat, rats bite each other's hinds. The responses are different, as well. In play, rats are distressed when their partners do not reciprocate the nuzzles or defend against them. While play involves some competition, it also requires cooperation because the play cannot proceed without both rats playing along. Additionally, rats are less likely to play with each other if one rat constantly wins. Both rats must be willing to switch roles and give the other a fair shot at nuzzling or getting nuzzled. So, while I may say "play fighting" as shorthand, it is important to keep in mind that play fighting does not resemble serious fighting at all. *The Playful Brain: Venturing to the Limits of Neuroscience* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2009), pp. 15-25, 42-3.

[73] Pellis and Pellis, *Playful Brain*, pp. 46-54. Decorticated rats do play differently than rats with the whole brain. But they will still exhibit playful behavior and try to play with others in contests that result in a 50/50 win-loss ratio.

[74] Pellis and Pellis, *Playful Brain*, pp. 63, 72-4, 189 n. 78.

Pellis and Pellis conclude from these experiments that play seems to train an animal's response to stress coming from unpredictable circumstances, especially as exhibited by other animals. Rats who do not play tend to over-react to any playful advance, taking it as an attack. They therefore get into more fights because they misunderstand the behavior of rats around them. And when they actually are attacked by others, they take a longer time to recover and return to normal behavior. They cannot cope well with stress.[75] This means that play deprivation is brutal, especially in a social species. The daily lives of play-deprived animals involve many failed social interactions that incite high levels of stress. For example, play-deprived rats fail at friendship and sex.

Healthy rats, by contrast, use play fighting as a means of social cohesion, stress reduction, and maintenance of friendships. By playing to nuzzle each other's napes, healthy rats learn to deal with the stress of confrontation, and they adapt their movements to an unpredictable opponent. This contest bonds them with their play partners. Play thus serves more than the developmental functions of individual, juvenile rats; it serves wider social functions too. Because it regulates stress and fosters community, rats play beyond childhood into adulthood.[76]

However, while play can be good, excessive play has negative effects. In one experiment that the Pellises discuss, rats were held in large cages with plentiful objects to interact with (as opposed to the normal group raised inside the smaller standard cages with few things interact with). The rats who lived in the enriched environment performed worse at sex than normal rats. Other experiments also show that rats raised with excessive opportunities to play do not heed

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[75] Bateson and Martin, *Play*, p. 37.

[76] Pellis and Pellis, *Playful Brain*, ch. 5.

danger. Rather than walking along walls or under cover, they run in the open and explore; they seek novelty. This exposes them to predators. The Pellises' survey of experiments proved one thing: moderate quantities of play are essential for healthy rats.[77] Rats that play excessively spend too much time on diversion rather than developing individual or social skills, and this stunted their social lives and responses to the environment. Moreover, similar evidence is found in studies on primates and other species.[78]

Biologists Patrick Bateson and Paul Martin offer similar analyses of experiments done on animals to assess the importance of play. They agree with the Pellises that play simulates stress in a protected context. But in addition to stress regulation, Bateson and Martin argue that play allows animals to find newer, more optimal solutions to everyday problems. Rather than relying on instinct and social learning to perform mundane tasks, animals that play have opportunities to use alternative solutions to break out of less efficient ways of doing things. Bateson and Martin offer a mountain climbing analogy. Sometimes climbers find themselves on a false summit, and it is only after they look around that they realize there is a taller summit elsewhere. In engineering, the false summit is called a "local optimum," and the actual, taller summit is a "global optimum." Play offers the opportunity to assess one's own summit to investigate whether more globally optimal patterns of behavior lay elsewhere. Even though convention or habit holds

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[77] Pellis and Pellis, *Playful Brain*, ch. 4, esp. pp. 86-7. The Pellises temper their conclusion, suggesting that the play-enriched rats might discover new ways of responding to predators. For example, running under cover might work for most predators (like cats). But for owls, rats survive better if they run directly at the owls. The playful rats were more likely to discover these novel strategies for survival than those that stuck to the conventional patterns of behavior, but this comes at the costs mentioned above. For the most relevant experiments, see: p. 188 n. 68; esp. Aileen D. Gruendel and William J. Arnold, "Influence of Preadolescent Experiential Factors on the Development of Sexual Behavior in Albino Rats," *Journal of Comparative and Physiological Psychology*, vol. 86, no. 1 (1974): pp. 172-8.

[78] The argument also extends beyond play fighting to types of play between mothers and their offspring and the playful activities surrounding grooming. Pellis and Pellis, *Playful Brain*, pp. 62-5, 100-1, 122-9.

that the current way of doing things is best, play looks elsewhere to make sure. Play provides a space for novel behavior. And while most playful actions might not find more optimal ways of doing things, occasionally play will hit upon a novel, better way. And this can be taken up by any animal that learns the optimal behavior.

Play leading to better ways of doing things has many examples in animal behavior. For one, dolphins sometimes play by blowing rings and bubbles out of their blowholes underwater. Some biologists speculate that this eventually led to dolphins using the bubbles to screen off and move fish to the surface, where dolphins can catch them more easily. Similarly, a group of humpback whales in Alaska has been observed using walls of bubbles to trap fish. They then use loud calls to scare the fish toward the surface.[79] Sometimes play involves seemingly useless things like teaching animals to blow bubbles to chase or swim through. But other times, the skills learned while playing result in innovations that help animals survive.[80]

The exploratory features of play, along with its social aspects, allow it to train animals to assess conflicting demands. In keeping up with partners and creating novel solutions, play prepares animals to deal with situations they never previously prepared for.[81] While instinct and social learning can anticipate most situations an animal faces, play teaches animals to adapt and assess on-the-fly.

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[79] Bateson and Martin, *Play*, pp. 4-5, 72-4.

[80] Some of this seems speculative on the part of biologists. To me, it is unclear whether the bubble-blowing play behavior developed first, or whether the bubble-based hunting methods developed first and then were adapted to play. The exhaustive way to test this would be to see if animals do one without the other. But I have yet to find a source with this information.

[81] Bateson and Martin, *Play*, pp. 30-1.

Bateson and Martin also corroborate the Pellises' point that play is a sign of wellbeing in animals. When stressed, hungry, anxious, or ill, animals do not usually play. For example, rats who are playing will stop if exposed to cat hair. They even stop soliciting play for days afterward. Relatedly, the play of vervet monkeys is correlated with food scarcity. In dry years with scarce food, the monkeys do not play. But in wetter years with plentiful food, the monkeys play, and they play more if compensating for unplayful years. Gelada baboons and meercats also follow similar patterns with their lack of play during scarcity. This shows play's link to predictable, safe environments. All other things equal, if animals are provided more safety and predictability, they will play more. This was shown in an experiment with pigs, where the experimental group was given a sound cue each time it was taken to an enriched environment with straw and seeds. Because this group of pigs could reliably predict abundance, they played more than another group of pigs that was also given the same access to the environment but without a sound cue that trained them.[82]

So, what do all these experiments mean? The experiments that the Pellises survey teach us that play helps in the neuromuscular coordination of individual animals with their bodies and their environments, as well as the development of psychological mechanisms that help an animal regulate well its emotions when dealing with stress and unpredictable circumstances. Play also helps animals to bond and coordinate their behavior with others. Martin and Bateson add to this. They show that play provides simulations of stressful activities, and its protected environment allows animals to rehearse common solutions and explore novel ones. Play is therefore linked with the creative generation of new solutions to problems. And when a group of animals adopts

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[82] Bateson and Martin, *Play*, pp. 19-23.

the new behavior to optimize something, it is linked to innovation. But apart from skills, playful behavior indicates that an animal is not overly stressed, hungry, anxious, or ill. Play indicates that an animal feels well, safe, and faces predictable challenges.

Connecting Non-Human Play to Human Play

There is some hope that insights from these studies apply to humans. After all, play is important to humans too. In fact, humans are the most playful species with the most complex patterns of play.[83] So, it is likely that play exercises some biological function for humans, and it is just as likely that it involves some of the behavioral aspects scientists have observed in the play of other animals.

There are many parallels between animal play and human childhood development. The biological evidence supports Aristotle's imperative that young children ought to play instead of work because it helps them to learn and develop (*Pol*. VII.17). The biology and psychology prove that juvenile animals must learn to use their bodies during complex behaviors in dynamic environments. They must also learn to coordinate with peers, kin, and other species. Play helps with all of this. In developmental stages, play makes possible the serious and complex tasks of adult life.[84]

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[83] Biologists have noted that playful activity often correlates with large brains relative to body size, and humans have this feature. Pellis and Pellis, *Playful Brain*, pp. 55, 130-2. Stuart Brown also points out that humans are the most neotenous of all species; they retain juvenile qualities into adulthood much longer and to a much larger extent than any other animal. "Play is more than fun," *TED Talk: 2008 Art Center Design Conference—Serious Play*, Pasadena, CA, May 2008. Published on YouTube (12 March 2009).

[84] Plato makes a similar point, writing "I insist that a man who intends to be good at a particular occupation must practice it from childhood: both at work and at play he must be surrounded by special 'tools of the trade.' For instance, the man who intends to be a good farmer must play at farming, and the man who is to be a good builder must spend his playtime building toy houses; and in each case the teacher must provide miniature tools that copy the real thing. … To sum up, we say that the correct way to bring up and educate a child is to use his playtime to imbue his soul with the greatest possible liking for the occupation in which he will have to be absolutely perfect when he

Cautions in Moving from Non-Human to Human Play

Limiting What Biological and Behavioral Scientists Say to Philosophers

The adult world of humans is sufficiently different than childhood or any other animal's life such that the lessons from the previous section might not precisely map on to my present purpose. So, we must exercise caution in applying the descriptive work of biology and psychology to the normative work of ethics.[85] In this section I offer some cautions relevant to this project.

First, play in human adults is much more sophisticated than anything else in the animal world. Non-human animals are wonderous in their complexity, and animals have been observed to play in dozens of ways. For example, a powerful lion may let a weaker lion pounce on them, thus reversing roles. Or a dolphin may take a ball, submerge it, and let it shoot to the surface, thus exhibiting complex play with objects. But neither can compare to what adult humans do in sports like football, games like Catan, entertainment like *The Office*, or imaginative activities like Dungeons and Dragons. It is this complex adult world of play that captures my interest. I want to know whether adults should play, how much, and why. So, I need to extend the results from non-human play to apply to humans, as well as to examine studies of humans.

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grows up." *Laws*, trans. Trevory J. Saunders in: *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper, assc. ed. D. S. Hutchinson (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997), p. 643b-d.

[85] The is-ought problem is beyond the scope of this research. For those interested in parallel debates about what neuroscience and psychology can teach us about morality, see: Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, ed., *Moral Psychology: Volume 3: The Neuroscience of Morality: Emotion, Brain Disorders and Development* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2008); and Tommaso Bruni, Matteo Mameli, and Regina A. Rini, "The Science of Morality and Its Normative Implications," *Neuroethics*, vol. 7 (2014): pp. 159-72.

Second, many of the benefits that non-humans get from play can, in humans, be achieved by other means. Neuromuscular training, social coordination, stress regulation, and wellbeing are equifinal goals for humans. It is likely that all four ends can be achieved by some means other than play. That is, non-playful actions might also help humans to develop their bodies, minds, and communities. This is crucial to note because virtues in Aristotle's system serve unique functions for universal situations. Courage is the only way to face fear well. Any other way of facing fear would be vicious. So, with play, we need an analogue such that if a human faces something in the best way, there is no additional best way. Virtues are not equifinal like the benefits of playful behavior.

I am uninterested in writing a hagiography of play, something authors like Huizinga are guilty of. Instead, I want to know what sphere of life playfulness might regulate. And the spheres of life offered in non-human studies can be ruled out. Playfulness cannot uniquely regulate stress because meditation, medication, or socializing might work just as well, and those are not necessarily actions of playful people. Similarly, the sphere of playfulness cannot be training neuromuscular coordination, as serious athletes who do not necessarily 'play' games can nonetheless develop their bodies well (e.g. stern athletic programs in the USSR or no-frills powerlifting gyms like Westside Barbell[86]). Social coordination is not unique to playful people,

[86] Here, I should be careful to disambiguate senses of play. Westside Barbell was founded by record-setting powerlifter Louis Simmons. He lifted weights that would crush most humans, and he opened the gym to train athletes like him. Westside Barbell is invite-only and charges its members nothing. Simmons and his students repeatedly break records, and in part, they do it via innovative methods and custom-built machines, such as the Reverse Hyper. So, there is a colloquial sense in which these lifters 'play,' as in they innovate and find new ways of shocking their muscles and bodies out of routine and above training plateaus. And some lifters might even describe the training process as 'fun.' But every lifter there is serious, and the gym is for work and self-transcendence. It is this strange way in which 'play' and 'fun' are used colloquially that will inspire my hypotheses about play in chapter 4.

and wellbeing is much broader than playfulness.[87] So, we need to look beyond the functions of play in non-human lives.

Here, it might help to distinguish between strengths of contribution to a good life. Play as an action **contributes weakly** to flourishing, in that play as an action might contribute to living well in an incidental way. Play might be a feature of a person's life, but that feature may be constrained only to a certain stage (e.g. childhood or adolescence). Or play might serve to cultivate some other virtue, such as friendliness (even though friendliness could also be developed in other ways). The biology and psychology bear this out. Play as an action contributes to most people's development as persons, and many animals who never play face developmental challenges. But this type of contribution is different than what I am seeking.

I want to see whether play as a part of the character trait of playfulness **contributes strongly** to living well. What I mean is that people cannot live well without a character trait of playfulness, no matter what stage of life they are in. This is stronger than saying that people should play, as in have an occasional action they need to undergo like exercise. Rather, I am questioning whether people must be playful in an ethical sense, whether playfulness must be integrated into their character like courage or moderation. I want to know whether, without it, there is a moral flaw that precludes their living full, flourishing, human lives. This is why I must go beyond the biological and behavioral sciences because they do not argue such strong points.[88]

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[87] The lesson on equifinality, I owe to: Martin and Bateson, *Play*, p. 34. The lesson on humbling what play can do uniquely, I owe to my dissertation committee members: John Lachs, Jeffrey Tlumak, Kelly Oliver, Robert B. Talisse, and Christian B. Miller.

[88] This same distinction applies to playfulness as a character trait, which is not properly discussed until chapter 4. The weaker claim I could make is that playfulness is a character trait, but it is not morally or ethically relevant. It might nonetheless be important for a good life if that character trait is an important means to developing other traits like moderation, friendliness, or wit. But I intend a stronger claim, that playfulness is a character trait that should be subjected to ethical scrutiny. Playfulness is a character trait that partially composes human flourishing, and lacking playfulness is an ethical shortcoming.

The Uniqueness of Human Play

In addition to human play being more sophisticated and its benefits being equifinal with other behaviors, a third reason chastens hasty application of science to philosophy. Philosophy must supplement biological and psychological studies of play in non-humans because human play includes things that have no analogues in the animal world. In non-humans, play is used to simulate complex or high-stakes behaviors, such as fighting, mating, and feeding. Animals play at these to develop requisite skills for living, and play reduces the intensity of stress associated with these phenomena. The benefits of practice and composure preserved playful behavior for these types of activities. That said, animals do not play at safe activities, such as grooming, urinating, or defecating.[89] Humans do. Toddlers regularly mimic behaviors that make their parents blush in polite company. People exaggeratedly swoop their hair back, squirt their mouths with imaginary breath spray, or smooth their eyebrows to signal to their friends that they are about to talk to someone they find attractive. Colleagues jerk their lightly closed fists back and forth through the air to each other to indicate the triviality of a meeting or the unbearable sanctimony of a person's moralizing. Humans play at and with activities that animals do not.[90]

Part of the uniqueness of human play comes from the fact that humans can add something to play that animals cannot: implicit and explicit values. We can play with taboos to reveal the values that suppress certain behaviors. This begins early in childhood. Toddlers play in purely imaginative, pretend ways by fantasizing adventures, like dragons having a tea party. But around

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[89] Bateson and Martin, *Play*, p. 30. Monkeys may fling poo, and dogs may pee on each other. But neither activity is being played with. Bodily functions may be means to assert dominance without being the subject of play.

[90] Critics might say that we do not make games of urinating, defecating, or grooming. But I would cite the commonality of a "pissing contest" or people writing their names in snow with their urine as examples that we do.

age five, children begin playing in ways that involve making rules, negotiating enforcement, and mimicking the social roles they see in their communities.[91] Then, dragons do not merely exist as imaginary friends, but they must have wings, and they cannot play with you if you do not show proper etiquette. Animals cannot do this. They do not have any equivalent to the values invoked in childhood imagination or adult society's parody, mockery, or ritual. To make this point starker, consider jesters and carnivals. Jesters can speak truths that normal citizens cannot, and they can do so because they are involved in a playful ritual. Relatedly, carnivals can turn a collective of stratified people with sharp castes and power imbalances into a reveling crowd on equal ground. Human play can interact with values, and these forms of play have no equivalent in non-humans.[92]

For humans, play can also be transgressive, and creativity often tests (and sometimes violates) boundaries. Everyone acknowledges the genius of Goethe and Mozart, but few people today know Goethe's *Götz von Berlichingen*. There, the protagonist responds to an enemy's request for his surrender with: "Me, surrender! Grace and shame! … Tell your captain for His Imperial Majesty, that I, like always, have due respect! But tell him: he can lick me in the ass!"[93]

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[91] See: Alison Gopnik, *The Philosophical Baby: What Children's Minds Tell Us About Truth, Love, and the Meaning of Life* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2009), p. 70-3, 88-90, 228-9. While animals in some sense pretend, as in the case of chimpanzees caring for sticks, no animal seems to play with as advanced rules or complex social roles as humans do.

[92] See: Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Isolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984); Beatrice K. Otto, *Fools Are Everywhere: The Court Jester around the World* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007).

[93] This is my rough translation of the original German: "Mich ergeben! auf Gnad und ungnad! Mit wem redt ihr! Bin ich ein Räuber! Sag deinem Hauptmann vor ihro Kaiserlichen Maj. hab ich, wie immer, schuldigen Respekt. Er aber sag's ihm, er kann mich im Arsch lecken." Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, "Geschichte Gottfriedens von Berlichingen mit der eisernen Hand," *Spiegel Online*, ch. 4, http://gutenberg.spiegel.de/buch/geschichte-gottfriedens-von-berlichingen-mit-der-eisernen-hand-3621/4.

Inspired by this scene, Mozart later composed a canon entitled, "Lick Me in the Ass." In many creative, artistic, and playful endeavors, humans uncover, modify, disregard, and transgress values. Some of this is supplemented by humans' uses of humor and thought-play. They do not have to manipulate objects or interact with peers to play; they can do so all in their minds or in language.[94] Goethe and Mozart produced abstract symbols of play. This aspect of play cannot be explained by biological data gathered from non-humans.

In fact, historically playful spaces and activities steered the course of human history. Play happens not only in games, but also in the relaxed ways we conduct ourselves when enjoying the intrinsic pleasures of conversations, jokes, and fantastical stories. And many of these interactions are fostered by public spaces. Take the leisure space of taverns. In 18th Century New York, John Hughson's taverns provided a rare space where white and black folk could interact, long before the Emancipation Proclamation or Civil Rights Era. Taverns in the American Colonies became places where people could entertain ideas from many disciplines and cultures, eventually fomenting revolution. In 1960s Los Angeles, spaces like Black Cat Tavern provided a place for gay people to enjoy themselves openly. Leisure and play combined in public spaces not only to transgress moral boundaries, but also to challenge social and political boundaries that challenged the way society organized itself. These were far from idealistic spaces, however. Hughson was prosecuted for crimes that happened in and around his tavern. Some historians speculate that he was prosecuted harshly precisely because he provided a space where different races could mix. The Black Cat Tavern was also the site of an infamous incident where the LAPD beat and

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Here, I am also following E. B. White's advice not to explain why this is funny or what values it transgresses. He observed: "Explaining a joke is like dissecting a frog. You understand it better but the frog dies in the process."

[94] Bateson and Martin, *Play*, p. 14 and ch. 9.

hospitalized several gay men for their "lewdness."[95] Play sometimes has serious consequences, and its effects reach beyond the activity.

But it is not just spaces that we play in that cross boundaries; it is the games themselves too. American football was developed largely through the work of Native American students at Carlisle Academy under their coach Pop Warner, who began working with the team in 1899. They challenged the game's rules by inventing plays so that they could beat the larger, faster, and more prominent teams of universities like Yale. The students took the game of football beyond bone-breaking scrums to the complex formations and advanced strategies in the game today.[96] Similarly, baseball became an arena where race relations in the United States were challenged. Jackie Robinson's entry into a segregated baseball league in 1947 was a victory not only for baseball but also for wider social movements that were protesting the segregation in the American legal system, workforce, and housing market.[97] These historical examples show play and games are more complicated than anything in the non-human world. Even when playing games, the stakes, in many ways, are much higher than mere biological survival; play can impact identity and dignity. There is an added element of impacting how humans interact with each other and the values they pass on.

Philosopher Cynthia Willett cherishes play so much that she argues that it can become a basis for an interspecies ethic. That is, through play, we can learn values that not only guide individual humans but also humans in their interactions with each other and other species.

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[95] Steven Johnson, *Wonderland*, ch. 6.

[96] Sally Jenkins, *The Real All Americans* (New York: Broadway Books, 2007).

[97] Peter Dreier, "The Real Story of Baseball's Integration that You Won't See in *42*," *The Atlantic* (11 April 2013): https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2013/04/the-real-story-of-baseballs-integration-that-you-wont-see-in-i-42-i/274886/.

Building on the work of biologist Marc Bekoff, she identifies four central features of play. First, play involves role-reversals, as when large animals play with small animals and let them win. Second, play involves self-handicapping, as when large animals hold back their strength to let weaker animals win. Third, animals that play frequently communicate with each other, such as dogs when play-bowing with each other. This gesture insures that play does not turn into fighting or mating. Fourth, play spreads a positive mood. Two animals may begin playing, but eventually more join in if allowed. Willet's analysis of play shows that play embodies equality, non-hierarchical relations, and open communication with others. While she admits that play can be the sources of cruelty, she hopes these features can also be a source of joy. And in the human world, play can be used to undermine oppressive hierarchies, reinforce equal standing, and enrich relationships. Moreover, she argues that play can connect humanity to non-humans in a fundamental way that individualistic, anthropocentric Western ethics might not.[98] Even though Willett would disagree with my conclusion, I think her research reinforces the differences between humans and non-humans. She shows how play, an action shared by non-humans, becomes a basis for abstract ideas (e.g. ethics), which can only happen in humans.

Human Play

Yet despite cautions in using empirical data to address human play, we can say some things. Nearly all humans value play. Social psychologist Shalom Schwartz surveyed people on every inhabitable continent, and he identified play as something valued in every culture. It was nested in a value he called "stimulation," or the desire for excitement, novelty, and challenges

[98] Cynthia Willett, *Interspecies Ethics* (New York: Columbia University Press), pp. 68, 75-9.

that people can meet.[99] What this means is that theorizing about play and pleasure is not just a subjective preference. It is talking about a quality that generalizes to most of the human species.

Economists and political scientists conducted similar research. They examined humans across cultures to see whether there was a list of capacities that all humans have that governments should protect and cultivate. Instead of focusing on individual liberties, legal enforcement, or economic maximization, theorists like Amartya Sen began to ask what it takes to live a good life as a human. This led philosopher Martha Nussbaum to develop her capabilities approach to human rights, which lists ten capabilities as essential for a human flourishing: sustaining life; cultivating bodily health; maintaining bodily integrity; using senses, imagination, and thought; feeling emotions; engaging in practical reason; enjoying affiliations; interacting with other species; playing; and controlling aspects of one's environment. She thus includes access to opportunities to play as indicators of human rights and development. According to her, citizens ought to be afforded opportunities to laugh and enjoy recreation. Such opportunities partially constitute a good human life.[100]

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[99] Schwartz used copious cross-cultural surveys and research projects to draw his conclusions. Shalom H. Schwartz, "Are There Universal Aspects in the Structure and Contents of Human Values?" *Journal of Social Issues*, vol. 50, no. 4 (1994): pp. 19-45. Other behavioral scientists also found play as a prevalent value in cross-cultural studies, for example: Frank W. Wicker, Frank B. Lambert, Frank C. Richardson, and Joseph Kahler, "Categorical Goal Hierarchies and Classification of Human Motives," *Journal of Personality*, vol. 52, iss. 3 (Sept 1984): pp. 285-305. Through surveying dozens of cultures on every inhabited continent, Schwartz found a consistent human value for play. Moreover, Schwartz's survey method not only allowed him to find that all cultures valued stimulation, but he also found that stimulation had a positive relationship to other values, like "hedonism" (experiencing pleasure for oneself). That is, respondents who strongly valued stimulation also valued hedonism. He also found an opposition between certain values, where if respondents valued one, they were likely to devalue the others. He found this relation between (a) an openness to change (the umbrella category for stimulation and hedonism) and (b) conservativeness (of which values like conformity and security are parts).

[100] Martha C. Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 78-80.

Nussbaum emphasizes that items on the list, like play, are ordered by two of the other items: practical reason and affiliation. People must be able to think about what it means to live well and what is choiceworthy in life, and they must be able to associate with people as citizens, peers, and friends. Without practical reason and affiliation, basic capacities turn into mere animal instincts. By emphasizing practical reason and affiliation, she ensures that a human level of care is afforded for even basic capacities.[101] Take something like the need to eat. Someone can throw slop at a person to help them survive. But that is not sufficient for a good life on the Aristotelian view or capabilities approach. When **people** eat, they spice and decorate food; people put their culture into food. My mother will cook you sopapillas and pozole, not just hand you piles of corn meal and meat. When people eat, they eat with one another to share sustenance and company; they nourish their bodies but also their souls and relationships. My mother will invite you to our table, and my father will discuss with you the lack of rain or the Raiders' latest (usually disappointing) football season.[102] People eat food with one another. They do not inhale nutrients in isolation. This considered, social attention that people pay to activities is what makes the activities truly human. The same goes for play. Just giving someone a ball to play with is not enough. Rather, on Nussbaum's theory, a government must also make sure that people have opportunities to exercise their reason and social capacities in play. Play should be something that people can choose to do and express their reasoning through, and it should be something that

[101] Nussbaum is a neo-Aristotelian because she uses Aristotle's virtue ethics and a flourishing-focused political theory as justifications for her policy proposals or philosophical conclusions. The capabilities approach thus falls under the purview of Aristotelian theories. But Aristotle himself (or Aristotelians broadly) need not be committed to the capabilities approach. The capabilities approach is a member of the set of Aristotelian theories, but it does not constitute the entire set.

[102] My father died during the time it took me to revise this manuscript. *Descanse en paz*.

allows them to connect with others. Play cannot be a mere animal opportunity; it must be suffused with thinking and complex sociality.[103]

Biologists and psychologists think that play can go wrong too. Over the past hundred years, IQs have risen steadily, a phenomenon dubbed the "Flynn Effect" after the psychologist who noticed the trend.[104] But anxiety, depression, feelings of helplessness, narcissism, and suicide are also on the rise. Part of this can be explained by the correlation between intelligence, creativity, and mental disorders.[105] Relative intelligence and creativity is positively correlated with depression, anxiety, bipoloar disorder, and schizotypal qualities. So, it makes sense that, if groups of us are getting smarter, and if the observed trend holds, then it is likely that smarter groups of us will also be prone to psychological challenges. But other scientists—such as Sergio Pellis, Peter Gray, and Stuart Brown—have pointed to another cause for declining mental health in the developed world.[106] They lament childhood's lack of appropriately open, risky, and unsupervised play. Today, schools allow less time for children to play at recess and exclude

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[103] Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development*, pp. 77-83. See also: Martha Nussbaum, "Nature, Function, and Capability: Aristotle on Political Distribution," *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, suppl. vol. I (1988): pp. 145-84; "Aristotelian Social Democracy" in: *Liberalism and the Good*, ed. R. Bruce Douglass, Gerald M. Mara, and Henry S. Richardson (New York: Routledge, 1990), ch. 10; "Aristotle on Human Nature and the Foundations of Ethics" in: *World, Mind, and Ethics: Essays on the Ethical Philosophy of Bernard Williams*, eds. J. E. J. Altham and Ross Harrison (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995), ch. 6. For a detailed Marxian discussion of human activity and sociality, see: Daniel Brudney, "Community and Completion" in: *Reclaiming the History of Ethics: Essays for John Rawls*, eds. Andrews Reath, Barbara Herman, and Christine M. Korsgaard (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997), pp. 388-415.

[104] There has been, however, some recent evidence to suggest that the nutritional, developmental, and economic drivers behind the Flynn Effect have finally plateaued. This has led some popular news sources to say that the current generation is getting dumber. For a discussion of the Flynn Effect and what it measures, see: David Shenk, "What is the Flynn Effect, and How Does It Change Our Understanding of IQ?" *WIREs Cognitive Science*, vol. 8 (Jan-Apr 2019).

[105] Bateson and Martin, *Play*, pp. 62-4. See also: Pellis and Pellis, *The Playful Brain*, chs. 7-8.

[106] Mental health and human wellbeing are complex. None of the scientists would say that play deprivation is the *sole* cause for declining mental health. But they would point to it as a major cause.

many activities, sports, and games due to concerns for safety and legal liability. Additionally, helicopter parents are not letting children play in the wilderness, explore dangerous tools, or roughhouse with each other. As a result, this prevents children from developing the emotional skills they need to regulate stress, cope with unpredictability, and adapt to an environment that does not yield to them in every way. This does not mean children should be left alone in a macho, anarcho-primitivist hellscape.[107] But the youngest generation suffers from parents isolating their children from all risks and safe opportunities to experience failure.[108] And this seems to adversely affect mental health and the psychological skills that play used to develop in childhood. Additionally, it does not seem that current popular methods of play—such as television, video games, and socializing through social media—provide the same benefits.[109]

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[107] Heeding the advice of scientists lamenting the loss of risky play, Wildwood Forest Schools have been opening all over Europe and some in the United States. These schools are designed to teach children to light fires, uses knives, forage for food, and play in the outdoors. The founders cite increased self-confidence, autonomy, and freedom as their primary concerns for children who go through their schools. See: Jo Tweedy, "Inside the Scandinavian-style Forest Schools Where Parents Pay for Children to Learn How to Get Dirty, Play with Knives and Light Fires," *Daily Mail* (10 Nov 2015): http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-3302171/Inside-Scandinavian-style-forest-schools-parents-PAY-children-learn-dirty-play-knives-light-fires.html; and Alice Gregory, "Running Free in Germany's Outdoor Preschools," *The New York Times Style Magazine* (18 May 2017): https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/18/t-magazine/germany-forest-kindergarten-outdoor-preschool-waldkitas.html.

[108] Many magazines and newspapers, such as *The Atlantic* and *Forbes*, discuss the importance for parenting of teaching children to fail. Google searches will return dozens of articles. It is also something that economists and political theories have paid attention to. See: Steven Horwitz, *Hayek's Modern Family* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), ch. 8. To a discerning critic, there might be correlational relations here between lack of free, risky, and rough-and-tumble play and the ills of contemporary society. But much more would need to be done to establish a causal link. For support of these stronger claims about play and its benefits see: Peter Gray, *Free to Learn: Why Unleashing the Instinct to Play Will Make Our Children Happier, More Self-Reliant, and Better Students of Life* (New York: Basic Books, 2013).

[109] The effects of social media and technology on wellbeing are too complicated to cover here. The news about social media (and so the play that kids engage in) is mixed. Social media seems to exacerbate depression and anxiety, lead to sleep deprivation, deteriorate body image, present risks for cyberbullying, and create a fear of missing out. But it also offers an opportunity for people to read about mental health and learn from people's experiences. Social media might also build support communities and aid in identity formation. Royal Society for Public Health, *#StatusOfMind: Social Media and Young People's Mental Health and Wellbeing* (19 May 2017): https://www.rsph.org.uk/about-us/news/instagram-ranked-worst-for-young-people-s-mental-health.html. See also: Nadine Mulfinger, Sabine Müller, et al., "Honest, Open, Proud for Adolescents with Mental Illness: Pilot Randomized Controlled Trial," *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, vol. 59, iss. 6 (05 Dec 2017); and Jean M. Twenge, Thomas E. Joiner, Megan L. Rogers, and Gabrielle N. Martin, "Increases in Depressive Symptoms, Suicide-Related Outcomes, and Suicide Rates Among U.S. Adolescents After 2010 and Links to Increased New

This is not alarmism about technology and the newest generation; rather, it is an observation that if childhood and play change, then the type of adult that gets raised will also likely change.[110]

So where does this leave us? Here is a list of theses I have defended about play:

1. Play helps animals develop their neuromuscular and psychosocial systems.
2. Play increases knowledge of an animal's self, environment, and kin.
3. Humans can play with values, as in taboos surrounding vulgar behaviors, social roles in a stratified society, and norms used for evaluating behavior.
4. Play is a deep feature of all human life, and if a person is afforded no opportunity to play, they suffer injustice.
5. Play should involve appropriate risk and challenge to allow the player to develop stress responses, coping skills, and new skillsets.

This list begins to answer the questions from chapter 2, section 3. Play as an action has all the features of a complex phenomenon comprising part of a virtue. (I argue this in detail in chapter 4.) Additionally, this list of theses makes sense of the varied claims that scholars have made about play, especially its evangelizers. Because play is inextricable from human development and leading a good life, authors will ascribe extraordinary properties to it. But also because of its many facets, the claims will be hard to organize, much like section 1 showed in the variety of claims. These theses about play make sense of the plurality of play. A multi-faceted behavior like play mirrors the complexity of human life itself because it is involved in many fundamental aspects of human functioning.

Aristotle also thought play was complicated.[111] And he thought similarly about other complex phenomena. Friendship, a seemingly unified phenomenon, gets split into friendships of pleasure, utility, civility, and virtue (*EN* VII, IX). Courage, the virtue helping us to regulate fear,

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Media Screen Time," *Association for Psychological Science: Clinical Psychological Science*, vol. 6, no. 1 (2018): pp. 3-17.

[110] Bateson and Martin, *Play*, pp. 98-102.

[111] See: Chapter 1.

is mimicked by civic ‘courage’ of people who act courageously to avoid dishonor and martial ‘courage’ of people who act courageously because they are commanded to by a powerful officer (*EN* III.3-9). If playfulness is a virtue, it makes sense that it would follow the many complicated patterns of other virtues in Aristotle’s system. The challenge for the next chapter will be to integrate the data so far about play as an action into an Aristotelian account of playfulness as a virtue. Chapter 4 will offer a framework that organizes the disparate claims about play by connecting it to the virtue of playfulness.

Chapter 4

A SERIOUS DEFENSE OF PLAYFULNESS

Most animals cannot live well without playing. For example, play-deprived rats cannot coordinate their bodies with non-stationary objects, and any unpredictable situation stresses them out. This means that they cannot make friends or even mount potential mates.[112] Play is a source of information too. Animals learn to control their bodies and minds during the complex maneuvers of play. And social animals learn skills from others and bond with each other during play. For example, some dolphins train each other to use sponges to scrape the sea floor for food, something learned from play behavior.[113] While playing, animals gain skills to interact with the world and cope with stress, and they gain familiarity with themselves and their kin. Additionally, by playing in wider environments with other species, they also learn about their home terrain and inter-species interactions. Play prepares animals for life.

The stakes of play are even higher for humans. Beginning around age five, children mimic and manipulate rules and values they see. They do this in the games they play.[114] This sets the stage for complex social roles and group coordination. For humans, play teaches values, whether through games, rituals, or art. Most often, though, adults use play to rest from work and

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[112] See: Sergio Pellis and Vivien Pellis, *The Playful Brain: Venturing to the Limits of Neuroscience* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2009), esp. pp. 68-78.

[113] See: Patrick Bateson and Paul Martin, *Play, Playfulness, Creativity, and Innovation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), esp. pp. 72-4.

[114] See: Alison Gopnik, *The Philosophical Baby: What Children's Minds Tell Us About Truth, Love, and the Meaning of Life* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2009), esp. pp. 27-31, 221-9, 244.

stimulate themselves after drudgery, a trend found on every inhabitable continent in numerous cross-cultural surveys.[115] Play maintains our psychological health in the face of toil and matters of consequence. All this evidence points toward the **action** of play as crucial for living well.

But I want to extrapolate from the data to argue that there is a **character trait of playfulness**. That is the sole task of this chapter, and all previous chapters laid its foundation. The dearth of claims about play beg organization. Some philosophers, like Plato, warn against improper play and the ways it can deform the soul. Other philosophers, like Jean-Jacques Rousseau, see play as a pearl of authenticity and goodness that ought to be preserved from childhood onward. The disagreement should not surprise philosophers. Rather, a lack of clarity about the disagreement should.[116] It is not clear whether Plato and Rousseau (and others) are talking about the same phenomenon, so their opposing evaluations are unclear.

I hope that a theory of playfulness as a character trait does two things: (1) it organizes the plurality of claims about play in a framework of virtues and vices, and (2) it defends playfulness—and so constitutive playful actions—as equally indispensable to a good life. My

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[115] See: Aristotle, *EN* and *Pol*. See also: Shalom H. Schwartz, "Are There Universal Aspects in the Structure and Contents of Human Values?" *Journal of Social Issues*, vol. 50, no. 4 (1994): pp. 19-45; Frank W. Wicker, Frank B. Lambert, Frank C. Richardson, and Joseph Kahler, "Categorical Goal Hierarchies and Classification of Human Motives," *Journal of Personality*, vol. 52, iss. 3 (Sept 1984): pp. 285-305. For a complication of what "leisure" means in other cultures, see: Garry Chick, "Leisure and Culture: Issues for an Anthropology of Leisure," *Leisure Studies*, vol. 20 (1988): pp. 111-33.

[116] Themes about play span philosophy from Plato's *Republic* to Rousseau's *Emile*, and many works before, between, and after. Part of the wide philosophical disagreement stems from the fact that very few philosophers address play as an action itself, and almost no one addresses playfulness. There are criticisms and celebrations of play, but "play" and "playfulness" are taken for granted in their meanings.

Perhaps the most influential work in a related area is Bernard Suits' *The Grasshopper: Games, Life, and Utopia* (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2014). But Suits focuses on gameplay specifically. No doubt, some philosophers have tried address play more generally, as in the anthology *The Philosophy of Play*, edited by Emily Ryall, Wendy Russell, and Malcom MacLean. (London: Routledge, 2014). But here, again, playfulness as a trait is neglected. The only exception I know to this in philosophy is maría lugones' article "Playfulness, 'World'-Travelling, and Loving Perception." *Hypatia*, vol. 2, no. 2 (Summer 2987): pp. 3-19. There, lugones explicitly takes up the trait of playfulness and how it relates to relationships with others.

description of playfulness should show why some philosophers deride play and others revere it. But it should also sketch a trait that can guide our actions and ethical reflections on play and living well. While my characterization will not produce a list of necessary and sufficient conditions, it should be enough to distinguish play from non-play and good from bad play.[117]

My characterization will hinge on one curiosity about humans: we face leisure time explicitly. We ask each other things like, "What are you doing this weekend?" or "What kind of things are into when you are not working?" And we can use our practical reason and complex sociality during free time, as in playing games or organizing parties. Using our capacities well during leisure, I argue, is being playful. Plainly, we have time that we do not need to spend on mere survival, so we face choices about how to use our time. It is here that the virtue of playfulness helps. **Playfulness helps us to use our leisure time well by encouraging us to rest, develop ourselves, and engage our communities via intrinsically pleasing activities that lead us toward better lives.** And without playfulness, we neglect creativity, innovation, and inquiry into the values that we assume in our individual and communal lives.[118]

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[117] I could have chosen other thinkers to talk about playfulness. Kant and Mill are just as influential in ethics as Aristotle, as are Hume and Nietzsche, who have been interpreted as virtue ethicists by philosophers like Christine Swanton. However, unlike Kant, the empirical realities matter for moral/ethical evaluation (whereas, for Kant, they only count for practical or pedagogical concerns). And unlike Mill, the Aristotelian does not have to reduce a behavior's goodness to its pleasurable consequences. Moreover, Aristotle directly addresses play, and it seems like his ethical system can accommodate an account of playfulness (my arguments in chapters 1 and 2 respectively).

Aristotelians have a history of taking everyday phenomena in their messiness and tidying them up as best as possible. I hope to follow this tradition with respect to play and playfulness. I do not have room to defend why I find neo-Aristotelian ethics the best system for solving ethical and metaethical puzzles. And even thought I judge neo-Aristotelianism as best, I hope that ethicists from different backgrounds explore playfulness and play in detail. Philosophy advances further and faster when thoughtful people discuss things with each other, and thoughtful people often disagree. I invite this.

[118] John Lachs worries that my understanding of playfulness implies that we approach all things during leisure time lightly. When most people use the term "playful," they mean the opposite of serious or grave, and it seems like people do things during their leisure that are better described as grim, earnest, or non-playful. I will argue that playfulness, in certain ways, diverges from common ways of understanding it. It does involve non-necessary actions and the leisurely domain of life, but playfulness need not be juvenile and, in fact, requires a certain degree of

Leisure Time as the Sphere of Playfulness

For there to be a virtue of playfulness in an Aristotelian way, the trait must regulate some emotion or sphere of life.[119] There must be some situation or emotion in life that humans face repeatedly, and through this continuous interaction, people cannot avoid forming dispositions in relation to it. For example, we cannot help but face fear, so we develop courage, cowardice, or foolhardiness over a lifetime. Or, when pleasures present themselves to us, we become moderate, indulgent, or ascetic through our responses. Humans face certain things repeatedly, and because of that, they develop dispositions in relation to them. This does not mean that virtues are unreflective. Part of being human also means thinking about what we do and making our actions comprehensible to others. Practical reason and complex sociality should comprise part of our formation of dispositions.[120]

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seriousness. What makes a person playful is how she uses her leisure time to pursue intrinsically pleasing activities. But Aristotle is not a simple hedonist, and pleasures can be complex. For example, take amateur video game streamers (e.g. RiseAboove on Twitch). She does not need to play video games to make money, and she plays video games in her free time. But she takes them seriously, studying the games and practicing advanced maneuvers. She builds a community with her friends and followers who interact with her on her stream. She uses video games to pursue intellectual puzzles, cognitive challenges, social bonding, and the goods of happiness. In certain ways, she is serious about gaming. But what is indicative of her playfulness is how it organizes her leisure activities and what role it plays in her life. Being serious about play and being playful are not inherently contradictory.

A further puzzle, however, does arise with respect to playfulness, which is whether people who neglect it are really living a worse life. This would include people who never have leisure or who always make things about duties are missing something.

[119] See: Martha Nussbaum, "Non-Relative Virtues: an Aristotelian Approach," in *Moral Disagreements: Classic and Contemporary Readings*, ed. Christopher W. Gowans, (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 168-71.

[120] Humans are certainly continuous with nature. In *On the Soul*, Aristotle uses plants and animals to identify features of the human mind. Like plants, we grow. Like animals, we move and desire. But unlike anything else, we humans use reason. So, even though humans are continuous, we are something different. The added element of reason (and I would say complex sociality) makes what we do different from what animals do. See: *DA*, 414a30-415a14, 432a15-435a10. See also: Alasdair MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues* (Chicago: Open Court, 2001).

But these situations and their corresponding traits must have ethical stakes for them to be virtues or vices. Malformation of our character carries the risk of degrading our ethical lives; whereas careful cultivation improves them. Someone who is an ascetic coward will be worse-off than someone who has developed moderation and courage. Someone who enjoys life's pleasures and who does not let fear cripple him will live better than anyone who shuns pleasures or hides from anxieties. Aristotelian ethicists get their feet in the door by showing that who we are matters for how we live.[121]

What, then, does playfulness regulate? I propose that it regulates our leisure time: the free time that we have in spurts or stretches that does not contribute to our mere somatic or economic survival. Leisure is free time spent pursuing activities that its possessors value in themselves and find pleasing. Leisure is a near universal feature of human life today, even if only in small stints of time.[122] Because of its prevalence, we cannot help but develop dispositions in relation to it. Whether we choose to do nothing in our leisure time other than laze around, or whether we

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[121] This Aristotelian gambit that virtuous people lead better lives hearkens back to Plato's discussion of the virtuous person living better than the vicious one in *Republic* II. This also, in no way, entails that **every** trait that we have is morally relevant. Rather, the traits that we must be most careful to cultivate are the ones that help us to live full, flourishing, characteristically human lives.

[122] Leisure and free time are difficult to assess precisely. Marx and Marxians have long noted that the world produces plenty of things like food and basic medicine. More labor is not needed to produce more. Rather, the questions today tend to be about distribution. In fact, this has led some sociologists to document the curiosity of contemporary industrialized and post-industrialized civilizations: we do not need to work to produce things, yet we keep working. Some recommend shortening the workweek to four days and building in more vacation times to help people to enjoy their leisure. See: Clive Jenkins and Barrie Sherman, *The Collapse of Work* (London: Methuen, 1979).

Additionally, there is a puzzle about just how much leisure time economically developed countries have. While many theorists over the past few centuries thought that more economic development would mean more free time, we have seen in some societies that free time becomes congested and competes with many other things. Materially prosperous economies can, in some cases, lose free time to mindless consumption of goods rather than use it for leisure and development. See: Jonathan Gershuny, "Are We Running out of Time?" *Futures*, vol. 24, no. 1 (Jan./Feb. 1992), pp. 3-22; Lonnie Golden, "Comment on Jonathan Gershuny, 'Are we running out of time?'" and Jonathan Gershuny, "Reply from J. I. Gershuny" *Futures*, vol. 24, no. 1 (Jan./Feb. 1992): pp. 203-7.

choose to fill it with certification programs and competitive leagues, we all do something with our time. And this leads to habit. Moreover, these habits surrounding our free time impact deep features of our personal characters and social lives. It matters what we plan to do with our leisure time and what kinds of social interactions we choose to involve.

Leisure is as accessible as it is important too. People can exert control over their leisure time more easily than controlling their economic power, social status, or physical health. People can enjoy leisure for free through activities like hiking, running, reading, and listening to music. Moreover, how people spend their leisure time dramatically affects how satisfied they feel with life. The more leisure time they have, the better they feel. The better they use it, the better they feel.[123]

Leisure activities serve many psychological purposes. They often allow one to gain a sense of mastery within the activity, and these activities enrich our lives. The activities also usually become outlets for stress and emotions, and they help someone to escape everyday worries. Leisure activities usually improve self-esteem and allow one to achieve focus and control in creative expression.[124] The ancient Greeks held leisure as foremost about

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[123] Michael Argyle, *The Psychology of Happiness*, 2nd ed., (London: Routledge, 2001): pp. 223-4. Christopher Peterson, *A Primer in Positive Psychology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 92-4.

Arthur Schopenhauer and Madame Bovary might find free time a crushing bore. To them, I would say boredom is sometimes natural and OK. But to the extent that Madame Bovary or Schopenhauer feel it, it is a privilege and evidence of social detachment and lack of appreciation for self-improvement. I will return to this case specifically in chapter 5.

[124] This loose definition of leisure follows closely: Alexander Sager, "The Philosophy of Leisure" in *The Routledge International Handbook of Leisure Studies*, ed. Tony Blackshaw (London: Routledge, 2013), pp. 5-14. But other scholars have provided more detailed analyses of leisure. For example, Max Kaplan offers seven criteria essential to leisure. Leisure serves the opposite function of work's economic functions. Its possessors expect leisure to be pleasant and remember it fondly. Leisure has minimal involuntary social obligations. It is intimately tied to a psychological perception of freedom. The activities of leisure can range from frivolous to serious. And lastly, leisure often includes and element of play. *Leisure in America: A Social Inquiry* (New York: Wiley, 1960): pp. 22-5.

The quick discussion of leisure activities comes from Amy Wrzesniewski, Paul Rozin, and Gwen Bennett's discussion of "passions." "Working, Playing, and Eating: Making the Most of Most Moments," in: *Flourishing:*

recouperation, but in postindustrial societies, they can be about more. Leisure also entangles itself in personal expression, identity formation, and self-fulfillment.[125] This means that leisure has a high impact on our life satisfaction, and both its prominence and importance in human life beg its confrontation.[126]

There are moral stakes with leisure too. Aristotle argued that leisure is necessary for flourishing lives as individuals and as members of just communities. For example, all people should play when children because it contributes to development (*EN* 1177b4-5; *Pol*. 1337b31-3). And no person who always pursues practical things is free or magnanimous (*Pol*. 1338b2-4). People require more than mere sustenance and toil. Human life spent only on somatic maintenance and laborious drudgery lacks its humanity.[127] There is something degrading in enduring life without time to pursue intimate relationships or non-concrete activities. Humans need leisure too. This demand is not merely ethical; it is also biological. Animals who are stressed will not play.[128] And people without play or amusement cannot work well, much less

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Positive Psychology and the Life Well-Lived, Corey L.M. Keyes and Jonathan Haidt, ed. (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2003): pp. 188-93. Their discussion of passions also shows why it is difficult to think of work as being the opposite of leisure. Work, when a mere job or career, will never trump leisure time. But when work is a calling, and when that work engages a person's passions, it can be a source of incredible fulfillment. This is why my definition above relies more on necessity and survival than on labor or exchange.

[125] See: Bernard Lefkowitz, *Breaktime: Living without Work in a Nine-to-Five World* (New York: Penguin, 1979).

[126] While leisure has attracted attention in its own field of leisure studies and in the behavioral sciences, philosophers rarely talk about it. Notable exceptions are: Josef Pieper, *Leisure: The Basis of Culture* (San Francisco: Ignatius: 2009); Alexander Sager, "The Philosophy of Leisure;" Tom Winnifrith and Cyril Barrett, ed., *The Philosophy of Leisure* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1989); and Johan Bouwer and Marco van Leeuwen, *Philosophy of Leisure: Foundations of the Good Life* (London: Routledge, 2017).

[127] See: Chapter 1 for the discussion of Aristotle on Leisure. See Chapter 3 for Nussbaum discussion of humans using practical reason and sociality to imbue their lives with value. For a contemporary defense of the importance of leisure, see: Julie L. Rose, *Free Time* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016).

[128] Bateson and Martin, *Play*, pp. 19-20. There is a looming puzzle here, though. Gallows humor, artwork made in the trenches, songs sung in death camps or during slavery—humans seem to be able to try to make the best of terrible situations. I am unsure whether this counts as play behavior and whether this can be incorporated into a

live well. Play relaxes people who work hard or go through serious things (*EN* 1176b32-3, 1177a2-10; *Pol*. 1337b37-1338a1). Without this relaxation, the tension will break a person. And broken people often make for broken communities.

Celebrating leisure and play are not controversial in the abstract. The problem comes in considering **how** we should spend that leisure time.[129] Not all leisure activities are equal. If we do not use our leisure time well, we do not live much better than people who lack leisure altogether. For example, many social scientists are skeptical of spending leisure time watching TV, as it seems to lack the same benefits of active play. Children who only spend time watching TV or playing on iPads fare worse than children who play sports, tinker outdoors, or experience games with other children face-to-face.[130] Additionally, activities like dancing have much longer-lasting physical and psychological benefits than watching TV. Dancers train their bodies,

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theory of playfulness. To me, it seems more closely allied to resilience. But these counter-examples, while fruitful, are outside the scope of the present project.

[129] The evaluation of how to spend leisure time is the proper domain of the philosophy of leisure. Here, the standard ethical theories all offer answers. Hedonists can say that leisure should be used to maximize pleasure. Those drawing inspiration from economics can say that leisure should maximize individual preferences. Perfectionists can say that leisure should be used to develop the self excellently. See: Sager, "Philosophy of Leisure," pp. 9-11.

[130] There is a lot of evidence to show that TV and computer use can have detrimental effects on children's lives, while physical activity tends to improve childhood health. For example, TV can affect children's sleep patterns, and social media can deteriorate mental health in adolescents. Contrastingly, physical activity seems to reduce depression and anxiety, while improving cognitive function and self-esteem. See, respectively: E. Juulia Paavonen, Marjo Pennonen, Mira Roine, Satu Valkonen, and Anja Riita Lahikainen, "TV Exposure Associated with Sleep Disturbances in 5- to 6-Year-Old Children," *Journal of Sleep Research*, vol. 15, iss. 2 (2006): pp. 154-61; Gwenn Schurgin O'Keeffe, Kathleen Clarke-Pearson, and the Council on Communications and Media, "Clinical Report—The Impact of Social Media on Children, Adolescents, and Families," *The American Academy of Pediatrics*, vol. 127, no. 4 (Apr 2011): pp. 800-4; Stuart J. H. Biddle and Mavis Asare, "Physical Activity and Mental Health in Children and Adolescents: A Review of Reviews," *British Journal of Sports Medicine*, vol. 45, iss. 11 (2011): pp. 886-895.

This in no way implies that TV cannot be part of leisure. Watching *The Sopranos* is different than watching *Jersey Shore*. And watching *Jersey Shore* to relax after performing a 12-hour surgery on a challenging patient is different than obsessing over the show during all one's free time. The point here is that, generally, TV is less beneficial than other activities. It is important to compare similar qualities of activities to each other, good to good, etc. However, the difficulties in assessing the place of TV in one's life also show why Aristotelians constantly refer to actions **within the context** of a particular person's life and her particular socio-historical situation.

form communities, and immerse themselves in emotional music. All these things elicit profound short-term effects and enduring long-term effects. TV watching, as prevalent and accessible as it is, might de-stresses its viewers temporarily, but it does little by way of improving cardiovascular health, forming supportive communities, or evoking deep and long-lasting emotions.[131] Leisure activities have different benefits. And we must find a way to assess and compare activities.

Moreover, the activities that we partake in during our leisure time have potential risks. For example, extreme sports present high physical risks compared to others. BASE jumping—skydiving done by jumping off buildings, antennae, bridges, or cliffs—carries a fatality risk of roughly one in 60 participants.[132] But it is dramatic. It pushes the boundaries of human accomplishment. And companies like Red Bull will sponsor the best extreme athletes, paying them thousands of dollars. But the things we do during our leisure time affect our health. The habits of a nerd may be boring to some, but the risks of reading, watching movies, and socializing over meals are substantially less than riding motorcycles, bareknuckle boxing, or doing designer drugs. This is not intended to strawman risky activities; rather, I want to

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[131] Argyle, *Happiness*, ch. 8.

There is also a looming puzzle here about how escapist art or vulgar art might actually pacify a subjugated class and keep them from understanding how ideology or propaganda blind them to political problems. See: Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment and Mass Deception" in: *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), pp. 94-115.

[132] For example, skydiving has a risk of one fatality for every 130,000 jumps. But if a novice decides to skydive in tandem with an instructor—literally fastened to the instructor who deploys the parachute for both of them—the risk falls to one in 500,000 jumps. United States Parachute Association, "Skydiving Safety" https://uspa.org/Find/FAQs/Safety. A. Westman, M. Rosén, P. Berggren, U. Björnstig, "Parachuting from Fixed Objects: Descriptive Study of 106 Fatal Events in BASE Jumping 1981-2006," *British Journal of Sports Medicine*, vol. 42, no. 6 (Jun. 2008): pp. 431-6.

emphasize that different activities bear different disadvantages, and people must make these assessments themselves.

There is also something supremely transgressive about some ways we spend our leisure. To conservative communities, rock music worships the devil, coed dancing promotes loose morals, and drinking at a tavern with other races and queer folk indicates a character flaw. There are places in the world where people get beaten for drinking alcohol, or much worse for non-marital relationships.[133] Spending leisure in play can be creative and egalitarian. And in communities that prefer the *status quo* and hierarchies, play threatens social organization. Even in philosophy, both Plato and Aristotle warned against base forms of play because it can train children to have bad habits, and it can normalize perverse actions.[134] There seems to be a communal stake in the way we use our leisure time, in how we play.

So, building on Aristotle's point that we need leisure, and realizing that not all forms of leisure activities are the same, how can we assess leisure? In what follows, I will discuss playfulness and its relation to leisure time. I take "playfulness" and "engaging virtuously with leisure time" as referring to the same thing.[135]

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[133] See: Ollie Gillman, "'Alcoholic' Iranian Could Be Granted Refugee Status in Australia over Fears He Will Be Executed for Drinking Booze If He Goes Home," *Daily Mail* (26 Dec 2016): http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-4067154/Alcoholic-Iranian-granted-refugee-status-executed-drinking-booze-home.html. See also: Hugh Tomlinson, "Ashtiani Freed after 9 Years on Death Row," *The Times* (19 March 2014): https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/ashtiani-freed-after-9-years-on-death-row-5gk8c3nnds7.

[134] Plato, *Republic*, X. Aristotle, *Pol.*, 1336a29-b12.

[135] "Playfulness," in a strict sense, is an ethical evaluation; it is a normative term just like "courage." Colloquially, "playfulness" might refer to doing something whimsically or non-seriously. But I do not use this sense of the term.

Playfulness as a Virtue

Playfulness is the right way of responding to leisure time. By detailing the virtue of playfulness, we get a character trait that can help to distinguish good play from bad play. This will be useful for judging the great variety of things that we do in our leisure time.[136] And we can reconcile the accounts of philosophers who deride and celebrate play.[137]

The Psychology of Playfulness

Playfulness has a large **cognitive component**. It involves understanding oneself and what one needs somatically, psychologically, and socially. A playful person will always ask: what is it that I most need from my leisure time? This takes self-awareness in the ability assess what one needs, and it takes practical reasoning in the ability to assess which goods, games, and experiences are accessible to meet these demands. Humans are complex and have many needs. Part of playfulness involves deciding to rest the parts of us that ache or rekindle the parts of us that have been snuffed out by travail. So, battered and dulled, we turn to our leisure, and we must select among the many things that we could do during our leisure time.

How can we hope to make these decisions about how to use our leisure? Aristotle uses εὐδαιμονία to keep people focused on the holistic goal of living the best life humanly possible. Similarly, the playful person will use εὐδαιμονία to compare themselves against. This enables

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[136] Psychologist Michael J. Apter distinguishes between "telic" and "paratelic" activities. Telic activities have explicit goals and are purposive, such as serious study, charity, political and religious activities, collecting, finishing DIY projects, or taking classes. Paratelic activities are ones where the actor seeks excitement foremost, such as movies, games, parties, going to bars and clubs, listening to music, socializing with friends, fishing, or taking a vacation. Ctd. Argyle, *Psychology*, p. 129. Leisure time can include a wide array of activities. I hope that my Aristotelian account gives a framework by which we can judge the variety.

[137] The features I identify here in playfulness are necessary conditions, but they may not be jointly sufficient. I am open to revision of this list by addition of new features or perhaps reduction of others.

them to see how best to move forward. Playfulness involves reflection during one's free time to understand how one lives in the small moments and long buildups to life's goals. And the playful person then spends that leisure time to develop well.[138]

People might object to my characterization of playfulness already, saying that it seems too cognitive and unfun. It feels as though there is a looming paradox, akin to the hedonic treadmill, where the more one strives to be playful, the further one gets from it.[139] After all, what is worse than someone trying hard to be playful or have fun? They usually delude themselves and annoy everyone else.

However, this is where Aristotle can help. Virtues are not just about the information we think about, the principles we can work into logical arguments, or the skillful know-how to do certain things. Virtues involve these things. But they also involve feelings, motivations, and the pursuit of full, effortless, sincere action. People working to cultivate playfulness may seem thought-heavy and clumsy, and they may grumble at assessing their free time and trying to find the best way to use it. But with more practice, it will become easier. And they will eventually feel good as they develop good habits, stay committed to leisure activities, and connect their free time to self-development. And a person is not fully playful until they understand what needs to be done, feel good about doing it, stay motivated to do it, and sincerely act each time the virtue

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[138] There is no exhaustive, situation-specific advice to be had here. But thinking of life holistically does help to contextualize those decisions so that people can adapt their decision to the details of the particular situations. Just because Aristotelians do not produce lists of commands does not mean they do not have advice; they can defer to the particulars. This might not satisfy Kantians, but this gray, indeterminate area of action just is what morality consists in for Aristotelians. There are rights and wrongs, and there are metaethical concerns here. But they can be left aside for most people. Aristotelians only look for precision with respect to their domain of inquiry, and ethics is nowhere near as precise as geometry. Aristotelians give truth rough and in outline, but it is still good enough to guide everyday action. Otherwise, we would not bother.

[139] For a short description of the hedonic treadmill, see: Seneca, "On the Happy Life," trans. John Davie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), sec. 1.

merits. So, if there is a ludic treadmill here, it is only a problem during the initial cultivation of the virtue. After developing playfulness further along, the naturalness with which one acts will make one forget the treadmill altogether. Learning curves exist even for games, but once the game is learned, the enjoyment deepens. And the mere existence of a learning curve does nothing to diminish the importance of their activities. Moreover, the alternative of being unreflective about leisure seems worse. Sometimes we are served by drinking with our friends, other times by relaxing at home, other times by planning for a special occasion. Organizing the many personal and social demands we have takes a form of cognition. Feeling things out or doing the most convenient things will not always lead to the best behavior.[140]

Mood also matters to playfulness, and I think Aristotle could affirm some of the aspects of contemporary behavioral science. For example, Mark A. Davis found that the creativity so crucial to playfulness is at its peak when the player is excited but not too excited. If the player is hyper-excitable, they are too ecstatic to generate new ideas. But if they are not excited at all, then they are unmotivated.[141] Moods matter because they can fail to motivate or distract a person altogether. Moreover, mood can distinguish mean-spirited play from genuine play. Nina Lieberman observed that, in children, she could distinguish between friendly teasing and caustic mockery by observing the moods of those involved. The friendly teasing was consistent with children who could be spontaneous, joyful, and humorous. Playful children seemed more

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[140] A good example of needing cognition and social support is mild depression. I deal with this, and the last things that I want to do when depressed are eat healthily, workout, or socialize. But those are exactly the things that dig me out of my ruts. Often, I can do this through thinking about this and motivating myself. Sometimes, though, friends and physicians help me along. What I hope this shows is that emotions and moods cannot be counted on in all circumstances. And it is often our own cognition, as well as the cognition and support of others, that helps us through similar things.

[141] Mark A. Davis, "Understanding the Relationship between Mood and Creativity: A Meta-analysis," *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, vol. 108, iss. 1 (Jan. 2009): pp. 25-38.

creative.[142] This work on moods led biologists Patrick Bateson and Paul Martin to distinguish playful play from general play. For Bateson and Martin, playful play involves a positive mood, and that mood inclines animals to spontaneous and flexible behavior. The spontaneity and flexibility in the context of positive moods show how harmful mocking or exploitative games can be distinguished. In the bad forms of play, the mood is different, and the creative spontaneity withers.[143] So important is mood to playfulness, that philosopher Moritz Schlick said that the meaning of life lay in the joy of playing, in the activities we choose for themselves.[144]

The last psychological component of playfulness is **relaxation**. The activities the playful person participates in during her leisure rest and renew her to face life in a better way. Often this happens because the activities provide an environment that allows the playful person more control, autonomy, or power than other non-leisurely activities. Or the activities provide unpredictability, spontaneity, and novelty, distinguishing them from the monotony of careers. Sometimes the activities are not important in the sense of structured plans, as a virtuously playful person might provide herself with time to do nothing except spend it however she wants when she arrives at that moment. So-called "time affluence" impacts how people feel about their lives.[145] The demand for playfulness and improvement of the self and community are not demands for constant busy-ness; a virtuous person knows what she needs for flourishing,

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[142] J. Nina Lieberman, *Playfulness: Its Relationship to Imagination and Creativity* (New York: Academic Press, 1977).

[143] Bateson and Martin, *Play*, p. 13.

[144] Moritz Schlick, "On the Meaning of Life," trans. Peter Heath, in: *Philosophical Papers*, vol. II [1925-1936], ed. H. Mulder and Barbara F. B. van de Velde-Schlick (Dordrecht, Holland: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1979), p. 114.

[145] For a discussion of how time affluence impacts well-being, see: Tim Kasser and Kennon M. Sheldon, "Time Affluence as a Path toward Personal Happiness and Ethical Business Practice: Empirical Evidence from Four Studies," *Journal of Business Ethics*, vol. 84, suppl. 2, Working to Live or Living to Work (2009): pp. 243-55.

including taking it easy.[146] Additionally, the activities during leisure could be physically demanding, or they could require all of one's mental energies, ranging from sport to games to meditation. The point of these qualifications is that relaxation need not be somatic or even cognitive. I mean it more in the sense that Aristotle talked about play providing relaxation in a more holistic psychological sense (Pol. 1337b37-1338a1; cf. Chapter 3.4.). From her leisure, the playful person gets new experiences, controlled outlets, social contact, or solitary rest, and any of these allow her to relax. This renews her to return to non-leisurely life. The benefits apply to more than reinvigorated work or labor; they also apply to social interactions and mundane life. The virtuously playful person uses her leisure in ways that improve her mood, and this reverberates through her life.

Characteristics of Playfulness

Despite the levity of the mood or the effects of relaxation, the development and serious engagement that happen during leisure activities show that there is a **seriousness** to the playful person. A virtuously playful person not only entertains whims, as most of us probably do. A playful person will even maximize her enjoyment of small moments of leisure. But the playful person is most characterized by finding certain activities, hobbies, and pursuits to commit herself to. Sports, liberal arts, home crafts, games, and relationships can all be ways of spending leisure.

[146] In fact, it is quite probable that contemporary playful people in America might choose to do less. There is some empirical evidence to suggest that despite more leisure time certain people and families experience more busyness and report that they have less time to enjoy. This runs precisely counter to the value of happiness. The playful person does have an obligation to flourish and to use time for self-development and engagement of the community. But this ought not mean cramming a schedule full of activities. The holistic value of happiness—taken as an entire life lived well by someone with a fully developed personality—is precisely what should prevent a culture of busyness from taking hold. See: Anthony P. Graesch, "Material Indicators of Family Busyness," *Social Indicators Research*, vol. 93, no. 1, Time Use and Qualities of Life (Aug. 2009): pp. 85-94.

And the playful person puts time enough into the activity to gain basic competence. She strives for improvement and prefers some results and products over others. If I bake during my leisure, I do not accept all outcomes as equal and try to execute recipes competently.[147]

By contrast, a **flaky person**—someone who does not commit himself to something to get good at it or to get to know a community—quickly moves to new activities and lets each frustration or setback end his engagement with the current one. The flaky person is the "ideas man," the person who schemes but never executes. But this is not to say that commitment above everything is characteristic of the playful person.

Obsessiveness can take root in the severe person. The **severe person** stays committed to activities at the neglect of the holistic achievement of εὐδαιμονία or the development of friendships with others. He can take winning too seriously, focus only on calculable statistics, or pursue external goods like money or fame following from the leisure rather than cooperation, socialization, or the good of the leisure activity itself. This can taint everything with gravity, or it can leave an audience with the sense that the severe person misses the entire point of playing or having leisure. The severe person does not enjoy much, and he does not play freely or fluidly.

Being playful involves balancing both the flaky and severe impulses. The virtuously **playful person** perseveres through challenges; she makes efforts to develop special knowledge, training, and skills; she engages deeply and seriously with the community that plays in the way she does; and she integrates the play as a facet of her identity.[148] A playful person learns to play competently and understands the reasons she plays. She resists the temptation to make the game

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[147] Here, I use feminine pronouns for the virtuous person and masculine pronouns for the vicious person to clarify the back-and-forth discussion.

[148] Here, I am following closely what Robert A. Stebbins calls "serious leisure:" "Serious Leisure: A Conceptual Statement," *The Pacific Sociological Review*, vol. 25, no. 2 (Apr. 1982): pp. 256-7.

into life and to dismiss it as trivial. Play is necessary for living well, but it is not the only thing necessary for living well.

The playful person is also creative within boundaries, and she tests the boundaries too. Here, vices help us to identify what I mean by creativity. The **rigid person** deleteriously commits himself to the rules in excruciating detail. The narrow focus on the rules prevents him from exploring, communicating openly with other players, or seeing which rules can be stretched in which ways or which activities can be engaged in. A viciously rigid person sucks the vivacious spirit of play out of things by treating organic experiences like mechanical operations.

On the other hand, the **unruly person** is equally vicious. He refuses to learn values or honor boundaries. And while his transgressive personality may strike himself valiantly creative, it is far from that. He cannot create because all he does is criticize; he cannot play because all he does is satisfy his own whims without coordinating with others. The unruly person is irredeemably antisocial, isolated by his own selfish goals to enjoy the game his own way. He is like Johan Huizinga's "spoilsport." Huizinga observes that society tolerates cheaters because they take games seriously (even if winning nefariously). But society, he argues, is disgusted by spoilsports. Spoilsports refuse to play and thus spoil the fun for everyone. Rather than participate in the collective work of playing and maintaining the play world, the spoilsport bursts the imaginative and ludic bubbles, ruining play for everyone involved.[149]

The playful person finds a way between these two vices. She is **creative** because she takes the time to familiarize herself with the hobbies, games, or experiences she is involved in.[150]

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[149] Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (Kettering, OH: Angelico Press, 2006): p. 11.

[150] Research on creativity is booming. I do not have space or time enough to address the vast field. But a useful overview of some of the main claims about it can be found at: Stephen J. Dubner, "Where Does Creativity

She develops the skill or intimacy that creativity requires; she respects the activity enough to understand what she engages in; and she learns to perform competently. But then she moves beyond this. By learning the spirit of the hobby, game, or experience, the creative person learns the melody on which she can improvise. She can generate novel ways of realizing the implicit and explicit goals within practices.[151]

Being playful also involves a type of **humility** because of the exploration. Playfulness will involve failure in learning the initial rules or practices. And failure will multiply as a playful person tries to create and innovate. But none of the failures deter the truly playful person.

If failure stops a playful person from learning, exploring, and innovating, then he is fragile. The **fragile person**, in the sense I am thinking here, avoids failure because he takes failure as indicative of a character flaw, or he assigns too much worth to the opinion of any

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Come from (and Why Do Schools Kill It off)? [Ep. 355]" *Freakonomics Radio* (24 Oct. 2018): http://freakonomics.com/podcast/creativity-2/.

[151] For a discussion of human creativity in scientific literature, see: Bateson and Martin, *Play*, ch. 5. There they discuss the work of J. P. Guilford, who distinguishes between converging and diverging styles of thought. Convergent thinkers are critical and analytical, bringing ideas together for comparison. But the divergent thinker is open to and generates new ideas. They also discuss Paul Torrance who described creativity as having three parts: fluency (the number of different ideas that a person can generate), flexibility (the ability of a person to use different ways of thinking to address ideas in many domains), and originality (the measure of novelty of the ideas generated and the ability of a person to generate new ideas without relying on routine or habit).

It is also important to note that sometimes creative people can be taken as spoilsports. But history usually vindicates them. For example, American football was a brutal game that injured people permanently, comprising mostly of violent scrums. It was a game where Ivy League kids could test their mettle publicly without a war to fight in. But many inventions that improved the game and made it less dangerous were initially hated by the opponents. Pop Warner and his Carlisle Academy players invented new formations and blocking techniques to advance the game and find ways to beat the smarter, faster, stronger, and bigger Ivy League opponents. Even so, Pop Warner hated when the forward pass was invented, which allowed players to throw the ball to each other under certain conditions. The crucial distinction here, though, is that creative players do not break the rules as much as find ambiguities or vagueness that they can use to push the sport forward. This leads to innovation in games and arts. See: Sally Jenkins, *The Real All Americans* (New York: Doubleday, 2007); David M. Nelson, *The Anatomy of a Game: Football, the Rules, and the Men who Made the Game* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1994), esp. p. 127; Jad Abumrad and Robert Krulwich, hosts, "American Football," *RadioLab*, WNYC Studios (28 January 2015): https://www.wnycstudios.org/story/football/.

audience to his failures. This prevents him from persevering, which prevents him from bettering himself, his performance of relevant activities, or the communities that surround either.

But the playful person is not reckless either. The **reckless person** does not learn from failure, and like the spoilsport or the unruly person, he moves from disaster to disaster. The reckless person has no regard for the way in which he plays or the way he uses his leisure, insofar as it takes the brunt of his pent-up energy and frustrations.

By contrast, a playful person learns from failures and moves forward. Her humility allows her not to take herself too seriously, so she can stomach failure's bitter taste. But she also takes herself seriously enough to stay invested in the projects at hand. This allows a proper self-assessment, and it allows her to get good at the skill.

The activities that people pursue during leisure involve some amount of uncertainty, as does the entire processes of self-assessment and self-development.[152] No one can say who will win a game for certain. No one can say whether a craft that one works on will turn out as desired. No one can say whether a performance or activity will live up to expectations. For these reasons, the playful person will also be **optimistic** about outcomes. She will believe that she can win the game, that her craft will turn out given enough practice, that the experience of going out or doing something will give her what she wants. Leisure and play are training grounds for optimism and managing expectations. This optimism affects everyday life too. On the whole, optimistic people are more psychologically resilient and vigorous in life. This matters because complex society relies on people believing that the work and coordination it takes to organize everyone will pay

[152] Perhaps this does not hold as much for passive activities like watching TV or listening to music, but in games, hobbies, and experience, it holds better. I do not think anyone would say that passively watching TV all the time would constitute good use of leisure time either. Note, however, that one can more actively watch TV by following an actor, writer, critic, or genre so that they can engage more deeply with the artform of TV.

off.[153] Of course, optimism in the playful person does not need to be naïve or dimwitted. The optimistic person can call out unfair games.[154] She can rally against unjust communities and immoral individuals. But the injustices of the world should not dull her edge so much that she refuses to cut through the challenges of everyday life. When playful people lose this sense of optimism, they merely go through the motions of leisure activities. Maybe prodigies could be good without the optimism, but few teammates would enjoy playing with a dispirited person, and no good audience would enjoy watching them.

By now, it should be obvious that my conception of playfulness is irreducibly **social**. This also comes from Aristotle. The virtuous person is always sensitive to other people and the ways she directly contributes to others' happiness. After all, Aristotle argues, no person would choose a life full of all the goods of life if it somehow prevented her from having friends (*EN* 1155a6-8). And in conditions of political corruption and disarray, as in tyranny, Aristotle says that no friendships would be possible (*EN* 1161a32-4). Without others, we cannot be happy. And even when we have others, if they are not treated justly, we cannot live well either. The playful person is similarly sensitive to social considerations. Philosopher maría lugones makes this point when she writes, "Lack of playfulness is not symptomatic of lack of ease but lack of health. I am not a

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[153] Peterson, *A Primer*, ch. 5, esp. pp. 129-30.

[154] In behavioral sciences, sometimes scientists use the 50/50 rule for a fair game. A fair game between two animals is one where each animal is equally likely to win. But in gaming literature, this might also relate to difficulty and flow. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi studied extensively the relationship between the difficulty of an activity and the degree of enjoyment. If a person is engaging in an activity that is too easy for them, then they will be bored and not enjoy themselves. Similarly, if a person is doing something that is too difficult for them, they will be anxious and also not enjoy themselves. It is precisely when the activity is just beyond one's present ability that it is the most pleasurable. These activities exercise one's skills, motivate one to improve, and allow one to cope with the challenges in that activity. The other major contributor to an activity's pleasure is the social component. The more social the activity, the more people generally enjoy it. See: Argyle, *The Psychology of Happiness*, p. 128; Bateson and Martin, *Play*, p. 61.

healthy being in 'worlds' that construct me as unplayful."[155] lugones understands playfulness as something that flows from the self in the presence of other people and the worlds they create and inhabit. When we are playful, we are playful in relation to other people and the worlds we collectively interact in. She argues that when those worlds are harsh, we are not playful, and so part of ourselves wilts. lugones therefore characterizes the ideal of playfulness as "loving playfulness." The loving attitude constitutes part of the disposition for her. lugones argues that we must be loving because the self is at stake. She specifies that being lovingly playful involves being open to many things: surprises, being a fool, self-construction, and re/construction of the worlds we inhabit. It involves interacting with one another despite uncertainty, lack of self-certainty, sacred rules being challenged, firm aspects of ourselves being open to change, and the selves of others and their worlds being open to change as well.[156] I agree with lugones that playfulness involves others, and if we do not take them into consideration, we cannot be playful. Ignoring others, or mistreating them, means we are not playing or being playful.[157] So, even though some leisure activities might be solitary, obtaining leisure and using that time invariably hold social considerations. Playful people are aware of how their play affects themselves and others in their presence and absence.[158]

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[155] lugones, "Playfulness," p. 14.

[156] lugones, "Playfulness," pp. 16-7.

[157] I rely on the social requirement to ensure that playful people are not bullies or harassers. But this also flirts with a strong unity of the virtues thesis. In other words, I think misusing social relationships or others can change the ethically good playfulness into something worse. But a virtue like justice or friendliness might also be relevant here. It seems as though a playful person will also need to be friendly and just. I doubt whether a playful person could be fully playful without other virtues, especially moderation, friendliness, and justice.

[158] Reflecting on his love of crossword puzzles, Jeffrey Tlumak asked me two things that are important to mention but too far outside the scope of the research here. First, he asked whether the sociality could be imagined. I am non-committal with respect to this. Literature, games, or perhaps anything linguistic rely on imagined characters or players. So, it seems like imagined communities would be good in similar ways to real life interactions. I am most concerned with people neglecting others who could be included or helped through play. That leads to Tlumak's

Playfulness and a Good Life

Here, I have given no definition of "play," nor have I tried to categorize all activities that a playful person might do. Instead, I argued that to face our leisure time well, we need to be playful. And to be playful, a person must be serious, creative, humble, optimistic, and social. A playful person uses her leisure time to move herself closer to happiness. This does not mean that she broods or labors. Rather, it means she stays committed to leisure activities to learn as much as she can about them, to push them forward, and to socialize with other people. Being playful means that one cares to use leisure time for enjoyable self-exploration and self-improvement. But the playful person is not solipsistic. Being playful also means being sensitive to the social demands of justice. Just as exclusionary games on the playground deserve repudiation so does a person who is 'playful' but unjust.[159] The sketch of playfulness offered here shows why contemporary people need to make time for leisure. It is during our leisure that we find intrinsic enjoyment in activities, and it is during our leisure that we can shape ourselves into better people and more intimate and stronger communities.

I can imagine that critics will wonder whether what I have described as "playfulness" is a misnomer. I know of no other word, however. Play involves more than games, and it cannot be

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second question, which is whether there can be phases in life, such that at one point someone is social enough to justify more solitary practices later on. Here, this seems plausible to me within a certain limit. People need others. And sociality here need not involve taxing interactions. But it also seems that solitary activity is permissible. The most important aspect of the social requirement of playfulness is that it keeps people from being malevolent, neglectful, or otherwise socially detached. The solitary person is not necessarily any of these. He might just choose to disengage, and that would be permissible. But it is when a person is solitary and misanthropic, miserly, and unconcerned with others that the social aspect is transgressed in some harmful way.

[159] Here, again, I am parting with colloquial uses of the term "playful." Colloquially, "playful" is comfortably allied with mischievous or outright malicious people. But on this Aristotelian account, "playfulness" must be nested in the context of a person's life and her journey toward happiness. This makes things in life answerable to the concerns of developing a good character and working toward flourishing.

separated from our leisure time. And leisure time cannot be saddled with severe concern for duty or necessity, or else it ceases to be leisure.[160] In this broad arena of life that we all face, it seems that playfulness can serve as the guide for assessing our behavior. And without a guide, we mar our chances at happiness.

But why buy into my account? This framework organizes the divided opinions of philosophers on play. Why might Rousseau champion play? He understands the deeply creative, cooperative, and optimistic ways play impacts life. These things encourage us to develop ourselves, to help others, and to savor many of life's experiences. Philosophers who champion play rightly emphasize the positive aspects of it. Why, then, do Plato and Aristotle criticize some forms of play? They understand that 'play', with the wrong mood and motivations, can train people to be recalcitrant to new ideas, mean-spirited toward other citizens and friends, and indulgent in their own impulses. They rightly notice that play is not amoral, and its moral stakes can be used for exploitation and exclusion just as much as enjoyment, self-improvement, or authenticity. Both camps of philosophers are sensitive to the moral stakes of play. And playfulness, as a character trait, helps us to assess the multivalent aspects of our characters in relation to leisure and on the way to living well. Leisure can renew us, shelter us in life's storms, and provide a showcase for life's joys. But leisure can also present an opportunity for us to become callous, unjust, and attuned to the wrong things in life. The ambivalence of play shows exactly why playfulness is useful here. Assessing the activity of play in relation to the character

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[160] There is a potential puzzle here about whether the moral demands of character development and happiness, which judge everything in life, turn leisure itself into some obligation. That is, on this neo-Aristotelian account, are there actually any "free" activities or things pursued "just for the sake of themselves"? However, I would say that these large-scale concerns for character development and striving for happiness do not make things necessary in the same way that obtaining food is necessary for survival. The background concerns of character and happiness are there for all people all the time. But this does not make them crushing, nor does it undermine the relevant sense of freedom I am addressing in leisure time. I examine this issue in Chapter 5, sec. 3.

trait contextualizes the intrinsically enjoyable activities within the moral pursuit of living well with others. Focusing on playfulness, rather than play, gives us a vantage to assess play.

Rather than asking what makes a particular activity good or bad, I have shown we should ask two other questions: (1) Can someone live as a full, flourishing human being while doing that activity? And (2) can someone who does that thing remain a properly playful person? Test cases like cheating and bullying obviously fail. But on my account, they do not fail because they cannot be creative or done joyfully. A history of geniuses behind moral atrocities proves otherwise. Rather, these actions fail to be playful because they destroy a person's flourishing if they become a habit or if the play is caustic enough. Bad play fails the moral test because it gets all wrong both the assessment of life's goals and the mood of a playful person.

Other cases, like enjoying art that portrays immoral characters as valiant champions, are harder to address. Then again, they always have been.[161] While this account cannot settle the debates about the moral evaluation of art or games, it can offer a new metric by which to assess them. On the terms laid out here, the immoral effects must be demonstrable. It must be shown how certain activities affect our habits and how that detracts, in fact, from our achievement of happiness. Aristotelians always play an empirical game. And in weighing the im/morality of play, the empirical evidence must do the heavy lifting, and the life-long goal of happiness must do the judging.

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[161] In Plato's *Republic* and Aristotle's ethical and political theories, there are many arguments for why just societies should censor certain vulgar artforms and behaviors, especially for children. Plato is concerned about how they misrepresent things and train us to feel good toward bad things or hopeless toward challenging situations. Aristotle is similarly concerned, but he is most remembered for his argument from κάθαρσις, that certain things help us to express and rid ourselves of negative emotions. Lots more has been said since then, and debates rage on. For contemporary discussions, see: Berys Gaut, *Art, Emotion, and Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Richard A. Posner, "Against Ethical Criticism," *Philosophy and Literature*, vol. 21, no. 1 (Apr. 1997): pp. 1-27; Michael Kammen, *Visual Shock: A History of Art Controversies in American Culture* (New York: Vintage Books, 2006).

I must address a looming criticism that my view of playfulness is too positive. The main reason this arises is that I have only discussed playfulness in a strict sense, as a virtue. I have described mostly the qualities of the virtue, not related vices. Colloquially, people often say that bad people are playful. Romans slew prisoners in creative ways in the Colosseum; Catholic officials tortured heretics with innovative engineering; Nazi physicians invented novel experiments for human castration and survival in extreme conditions and executed them on prisoners gleefully. Some might want to call these examples (and many others) 'playful.' But on my theory, they are not playful because they fail various aspects of the character trait. These behaviors developed in the perpetrators many vicious thoughts, feelings, and motivations.[162] Their actions took them further away from flourishing. And even on the criteria of playfulness, they clearly fail the social requirement. So, while these vicious examples of play may be creative in some ways, they would never be playful on my account. Because playfulness is firmly fixed to a person's own wellbeing, and because a person's wellbeing is attached to the wellbeing of her community, the trait must be assessed holistically. And I would say that the decline of Rome, the conquests of Catholic countries, and World War II Germany all show precisely why people in this period faced many challenges to flourishing. It is only when actions of play or instances of creativity are abstracted away from particular persons and their historical circumstances that they can be judged as 'playful.' But, again, the particularity must be heeded, and the impacts of the playful activities must be connected to how they affect the players and the people around them. When this is done, they fail the criteria I laid out.[163]

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[162] This is why Bateson, Martin, and Lieberman all include aspects of mood or affect in their theories of play. They consider the psychological context of actions to distinguish good from bad types of play.

[163] Maybe a critic would amplify his criticism by saying that my theory of playfulness seems too *ad hoc* in an attempt to get around this criticism and that the fact that my theory cannot include these depraved cases of play as playful counts against it. To the *ad hoc* criticism, I would answer that this is why I ground the traits of playfulness in

My complex criteria for assessment lead to another issue I must note, even though I think its technicality would detract from my present project. I suspect that my theory of playfulness relies on a unity of the virtues: my virtue of playfulness depends, in some way, on other virtues like friendliness, wittiness, justice, etc. Playful people will likely find it easier to be friendly and witty, as their leisure activities have cultivated skills to manage social goods and pleasures. Or, unjust or cowardly people will likely find it difficult to be playful, usually because they fail the social requirement. But past this observation, it is unclear whether the unity of the virtues assumed in my theory is something relatively **weak** (e.g., partial coinstantiation of the virtues, where some virtues often happen to be found together in the same person) or quite **strong** (e.g. some virtues have causal connections to others, such that development of one requires development of another). Given its holism, neo-Aristotelian psychologies usually hold that the various dispositions of the virtuous person interact so that sometimes affecting one disposition affects others. Being playful affects how one can display wittiness, for example. But it is unclear whether playfulness affects all virtues and how. Should a critic find a crucial way this affects my theory, I would gladly return to this technicality in future work.

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flourishing. I am hypothesizing that people who use leisure in the ways I specify live better lives than those who do not. It might seem *ad hoc*, but it is testable. To the criticism about the wider sense of play, I have no reply other than to say that I am content to restrict playfulness to include only ethical playfulness.

There is a second set of examples that my theory might have a hard time contending with, and that is the work of great artists who had terrible ethical lives. Paul Gaugin's abandoning his family and marrying a young girl, Jackson Pollock's anger and fraught relationships, musicians who suffer drug addiction—examples abound. My theory should have something to say about these people, and given a strong unity of the virtues thesis, it should say that they could not be truly playful without other virtues developed. I am unsure of how to respond to this. But I would say that it is consistent with my theory that good play improves lives, or using leisure time to rest, develop, and engage community leads to ethical improvement. Despite whatever ethical criticism I have of these cases, I would say that this shows exactly why this sphere of life is important. Without their art, these people would be repugnant. But with their art, these people become complicated, and their lives beg a more holistic and nuanced assessment. I find the alternative theories unsatisfying if they say that artistic creation is outside the realm of moral assessment, precisely because it seems the art affects our ethical evaluation of the lives of the people in these cases.

I can hear one critic say that he is sympathetic to my project, but that my definition of playfulness has made any use of leisure time into play and, by extension, anything done in leisure time a game. He might add that this is a decidedly un-Aristotelian conclusion to reach because Aristotle takes the contemplative life as the best life, and he thought philosophy was certainly more than just a game (*EN* X.7-8).

To this critic, I would say two things. First, the breadth of my definition of playfulness is intentional. The other alternatives are too narrow, as is the critic's objection that important things are just games. After all, "game" is too narrow a conception for everything that happens in leisure. Games typically have rules, goals, and other features that non-representative yet intrinsically pursued activities, like church attendance or hiking, might not share.[164] I want to include all leisure activities under the domain of playfulness, not just games. Additionally, "play" itself might be too narrow to describe everything, as this concept usually focuses exclusively on the subjective experience of joyful activity partaken freely.[165] "Playfulness" offers a broader solution by relating these two ideas by attaching them to character formation and living life. Yet playfulness also does not stretch the definition beyond usefulness because there are characteristics indicative of playful people. Those who live flourishing lives use their leisure time well, and they can train themselves and learn to live with others through their leisure activities. And without this leisure time, they cannot flourish. So, my first reply is that "playfulness" properly applies to everything done in leisure time, and it also provides guidance

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[164] For a broad overview of what games are, see: C. Thi Nguyen, "Philosophy of Games," *Philosophy Compass*, vol. 12, issue 8 (Aug. 2017): pp. 1-18.

[165] For a survey of definitions of "play," see: Randolph Feezell, "A Pluralistic Conception of Play" in *The Philosophy of Play*, ed. Emily Ryall, Wendy Russell, and Malcolm MacLean (London: Routledge, 2014), ch. 1; see also: Emily Ryall, "Playing with Words: Further Comment on Suits' Definition" in: *Philosophy of Play*, ed. Ryall, Russell, and MacLean, ch. 3.

by contextualizing the actions within the course of a person's life and their pursuit of happiness. I think the definition does the work any ethical term needs to do.

So, how do I answer the charge of my theory of playfulness relegating philosophy to the realm of mere play? I think my critic is only half right. Like play, philosophy is serious, creative, humble, optimistic, and social. It must be all those things to climb the icy heights of reason and apply the knowledge from the celestial realm to the teeming, balmy world of prudence. Perhaps those insulted by the comparison consider only the opinion of flaky, fragile, reckless people, people I would consider unplayful. Play is serious. And the playful person must use many of the skills that a philosopher would to understand herself and her communities. Calling philosophy playful is only an insult for those who do not understand how important being playful is.

But something else comes out of the comparison of play and philosophy: philosophy might rightly be integrated into a life lived well, but the type of philosophy relevant here is not the academic, professionalized philosophy of universities today. Rather, it is the philosophy that the ancient world knew: concerns about the deep nature of daily life, puzzles about how we investigate ideas, and assessments of the values we hold and whether they lead us closer to living well. This type of philosophy is social, and it is consistently applied to everyday life. This is not to insult contemporary philosophy and its specialized tasks any more than it is to insult contemporary microbiology for its esoteric investigations of cellular mechanisms and organic reactions. It is just to say that philosophy, in that broad way that the ancients understood it, is very much a part of the playful person and anyone who explicitly evaluates their lives. But philosophy, in the narrow sense that academics and administrators use it in institutions, is not necessary for living well. Someone reading Aristotle's celebration of intellectual activity makes a grave error if he thinks it compares directly to professional academics today.

Intellectual activity is necessary for a good life.[166] And because it does not require much and it is hard to take away from someone, learning to think offers durable goods to a person who wants to live well. Thought touches every aspect of life. But Aristotle knew we were so much more than thinking things. We have bodies that must grow and reproduce. We have desires that push and pull us. We have emotions that attract and repulse us toward and away from life's cornucopia of goods. We have motivations and dispositions that bias our thoughts and give momentum to our actions. And we are not people, in the full sense of the term, apart from friends, fellow citizens, and the complex interactions we have with people all over the world. Aristotle, no doubt, was an intellectualist, holding that reason is the supreme faculty that organizes everything. But leaders have nothing without followers, and followers can always push back. Humans are complex, and Aristotle knew this. To read him only as an intellectual is to abandon his complex psychology and ambivalent assessments of certain ethical goods.

Leisure affects our lives. Without it, no person is happy. But if a person only spends his leisure watching *The Office* while browsing Facebook and Instagram on his cell phone, he has missed the point of life. We may do this on occasion. But if we never delve more seriously into crafts, activities, or games that challenge us and bring us closer to other people, we waste opportunities to understand ourselves and others, as well as to improve our own lives and the lives of others. Playfulness as a virtue deserves as much consideration as the classical virtues like courage, moderation, and justice. And play, as an activity, deserves investigation as much as

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[166] By "intellectual activity" I mean using one's mind to analyze problems and synthesize solutions. It need not be academic, just cognitive. For some, this might still be exclusionary. But this is a bullet neo-Aristotelians must bite. See, for example, Martha Nussbaum, "Aristotle on Human Nature and the Foundations of Ethics" in: *World, Mind, and Ethics: Essays on the Ethical Philosophy of Bernard Williams*, eds. J. E. J. Altham and Ross Harrison (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995), ch. 6. For a discussion, see: Jeff McMahan, "Cognitive Disability, Misfortune, and Justice," *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, vol. 25, no. 1 (Winter 1996), pp. 3-35.

other activities like making money and friends. If we neglect playfulness and what it teaches us about our characters and the goals of our lives, we neglect reflection on a crucial area of our lives.

Chapter 5

PLAYFULNESS VERSUS BROADNESS, BOREDOM, AND BURDEN

It is difficult to give definitive examples of playfulness. Much depends on context. Neo-Aristotelians evaluate playfulness with respect to its place in a person's overall life and the playfulness's fit with her sociohistorical circumstances, traditions, and institutions. Neo-Aristotelians need particular details to make judgments. That said, Aristotelians can use exemplars, people who seem to exhibit the virtue fully, so I will try to include examples where I can in this chapter. For example, a playful person today could be someone who plays video games in her free time. Maybe she also streams on Twitch.tv to live followers, with whom she interacts, thus forming a community. Maybe she also donates part of her advertisement revenue and audience donations to charity. This is the story of many of the most popular streamers today, people like Ninja, Nickmercs, and DrDisrespect.[167] Another contemporary example might be a writer who spends his free time learning to write fiction, workshopping pieces with friends, and submitting stories to the best venues for his genre. Both examples require playful people to be serious enough to learn their craft, creative enough to get good at it, optimistic in their attempts

[167] There is an added complication here that Ninja, Nickmercs, and DrDisrespect play video games professionally. I am unable to address whether this undermines their playfulness, like professional athletes making money from playing their sports or philosophers teaching for a salary. I suspect that making money at traditional leisure time activities does change things in philosophically important ways. In fact, you can see it change gamers when they tense up under the pressure of a check, or when they start to worry about losing subscribers to their channel. It turns their playful activity into work, rather than people just happening to get paid while they play. But I also doubt that all monetary exchange disqualifies the activity as playful altogether, as the pervasiveness of economic exchanges seems to affect everything. (And I am unwilling to accept the consequence that there is no playfulness because capitalism destroys all leisure.) That said, I only use the popular streamers as an illustration because people know them. The people I usually watch—RiseAboove, BeanSquampton, euphygrl92—are great examples of playfulness but also much less recognizable.

at difficult things to continue, humble enough to face failure, and social enough to interact with others constructively. Moreover, these activities seem to renew people to face everyday drudgeries.[168] Exemplars of playfulness show how leisure time helps people to construct themselves and their communities to face the world in a better way.

Even if a critic finds these examples as consistent with my theory, he might nonetheless take issue with some of the criteria discussed in chapter 4. Here, I hope to argue playfulness's usefulness by dispelling criticisms of my theory to show it more viable. I wish to address the most common questions, asking (1) whether my theory of playfulness is too broad, (2) what playful people do with boredom, and (3) whether playfulness creates a burden for leisure that undermines its own goals. Rather than focus on positive characteristics (as in Chapter 4), my approach in this chapter is negative. I want to say what playfulness is **not**. After all, sometimes you can understand the virtues by understanding the vices to avoid and the character traits irrelevant to the subject.

Is Your Definition of Playfulness Too Broad?

Marcus Aurelius acknowledged that critics make us better thinkers, "If anyone can refute me—show me I am making a mistake or looking at things from the wrong perspective—I will gladly change. It is the truth I am after, and the truth never harmed anyone. What harms us is to persist in self-deceit and ignorance."[169] This quote is appropriate for this chapter on critics. Not

[168] These are, of course, the criteria laid out in chapter 4.

[169] Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, trans. Gregory Hays (New York: Modern Library, 2003), bk. 6, sec. 21, pp. 73-4.

only is it beautiful and courageous, but there is also something playful about it.[170] Playful people use their leisure time to become better people and engage their communities. *Meditations* recounts Marcus reflecting on his own life during his downtime, assessing his own values and how he lived them. Keeping a diary and writing beautiful prose are crafts that take skill to cultivate, and Marcus put in the time to do that. He was serious. Moreover, he applied Stoic ideas in new ways, often softening hard-nosed Stoics like Epictetus.[171] He was creative. The passages in *Meditations* combine to draw a portrait of a man who understands how he can be wrong, how Stoic philosophy is a living project, and how his past efforts at exercising principles failed. He was humble. But despite his failures and toil, he believed in his practice and strived for improvement. He was optimistic. These pursuits connected him more tightly to his advisors and communities, and he is considered the last of the great Roman emperors.[172] He was social. Lastly, it is clear that his practice of journaling renewed him from his struggles and better prepared him to face the world. In his activity of journaling, we see evidence that Marcus was playful.

My celebration of Marcus's playfulness likely brings back the objection from the end of chapter 4, where critics say that my conception of playfulness is too broad if it lets philosophy be playful, or where they say that I am putting too much weight on playfulness. If we formed an

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[170] Many times, Marcus references shit (bk. 3, sec. 3; bk. 5, sec. 12) and semen (bk. 4, sec. 48; bk. 6 sec. 13). Part of this is him addressing visceral realities of living. But another part, I think, is using humor to address neglected parts of life.

[171] For example, rather than shunning social or political activity, Marcus worked out how he can be Stoic and human: depending only on himself for his happiness; maintaining a stable psychology by using reason to understand and order emotions and desires; and keeping a wider perspective on his own important but also miniscule place in a boundless, ordered universe. But none of that ever prevented his loving friends, honoring the gods, or helping the vulnerable. Marcus, *Meditations*, bk. 5, sec. 33, pp. 63-4.

[172] See: Niccolò Machiavelli, *Discourses on the First Decade of Titus Livius*, trans. Ninian Hill Thomson (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, and Co, 1883), bk. I, ch. X, pp. 45-9.

extensional definition of playfulness by sorting all the people and acts that exhibit playfulness, then we might not include Marcus Aurelius or his *Meditations*. Or if we formed an intensional definition of playfulness, that conceptual map might not describe Marcus or *Meditations*. I disagree for the reasons explained above. And I am arguing for this case specifically because it is non-obvious. Obvious examples abound—M. C. Escher, the artist who drew on complex math to make mind-bending illustrations; Richard Feynman, the Nobel prizewinning physicist who painted and drew to let his mind approach problems differently; and Amos Tversky and Nobel prizewinning economist Daniel Kahneman who discovered ideas through hours of amusing conversation.[173] These examples show how high-achieving people rely on playfulness—especially its creativity, seriousness, and sociality—to make breakthroughs in their work and improve their own lives and the lives of the human community. I think this is happening in Marcus's case too.

We readily admit art, puzzle-solving, and amusing conversation into our ideas of playfulness. Why not philosophy and other forms of leisure activities? I think part of the answer lies in us not understanding the skill that contributes to activities like art, tinkering, or talking; we under-acknowledge the seriousness already extant in play, or how playful people bring their skills to bear on leisure. Another part of the resistance lies in over-emphasizing the gravity of philosophical reflection or shaping of character and communities; we over-emphasize the significant goals at the expense of ignoring the wide variety of experimentation and aesthetic amusement that constitutes part of reaching these goals (or just enjoying the activity or behavior without goals). Important things, the criticism goes, could not possibly have such 'casual'

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[173] See: Patrick Bateson and Paul Martin, *Play, Playfulness, Creativity, and Innovation* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2013), pp. 57-60.

solutions or methods. But mathematicians and physicists recount how beauty guides their equations; engineers attribute innovations to playing with models and sample materials; philosophers use imaginative thought experiments and games to illustrate and test hypotheses. These things show how serious things can happen through playful engagement with leisure time. And I think playfulness offers a unifying frame to show that all these examples are happening during leisure, and that these leisurely activities impact how well we live our lives.

I am not saying that all of life is a game such that we are playful in everything. Bernard Suits argues that position, calling life a game of pleasure maximization. By contrast, I confine the scope of playfulness to leisure time; I do not broaden it to life itself. But while I disagree with Suits' main thesis that life is a game that we play, I do agree with his observations that none of us wants to acknowledge that serious things are less serious than our pretenses imply.[174] And for philosophers, it is not shocking when they say that life is about contemplation, just as it is not shocking when hall-of-fame players compare life to a game, or when artists compare life to performing or creating. What my account hopes to show is that all of these people are at least partially correct. What we do with our leisure—philosophy, sport, art, games, puzzles, socializing—impacts our ethical lives and often gives us a lens through which to observe the world. The habits and social bonds that we form in our leisure time affect how well we can live. The unifying theme in all of these pursuits is that they are all activities of playfulness. They are not all instances of play, and they need not be casually fun (even though we might play or have fun during our leisure time). To play a game more effectively, maybe we use part of our leisure

[174] Bernard Suits, "Is Life a Game We Are Playing?" *Ethics*, vol. 77, no. 3 (Apr. 1967), pp. 209-13. He characterizes life as a game, or an activity that a person sets goals in, where the player intentionally excludes means to achieve those goals so that he can play the game. He argues that the game of life is pleasure maximization and the excluded means is harming others to achieve that pleasure. And then he speculates about the many psychological obstacles that stand in our way of understanding this.

time to practice or organize a league, which are actions consistent with being playful even when not playing. The mindset of the playful person is the same across whatever engrossing and enriching activities we pursue in our free time. And since these activities happen in our free time (and are not pursued for paychecks or biological survival), they beg some organizing framework. I argue that playfulness provides this.

It seems as though the broadness objection attacks my theory in at least two ways. First, it could deny that leisure time is a unified domain in life. This means that my virtue of playfulness is too broad because playfulness is actually regulating many domains (or no domain at all). Playfulness simply fails to be an Aristotelian virtue because it cannot link itself effectively to a sphere of life. Second, the broadness objection could accept leisure time as a domain in life but nonetheless say that playfulness seems like the wrong thing that might regulate all activities relevant there. Other than what I have argued so far in this project, I cannot say much more. I hope that my first few chapters have shown that leisure time exists as a unified domain, and I hope that my nuanced view of playfulness as a character trait shows how the same mindset can approach all leisure activities. I would gladly listen to any other positive proposals or amendments to my theory. But, unfortunately, I cannot do more to scratch the itch annoying the critic who says, “This just does not seem right.”

Can Playful People Be Bored?

Everyone gets bored, no matter who or where they are. Psychologists find this universal. In fact, it is so pervasive an experience, describing so many people, that psychologists attempt to

separate it into parts to make it more easily testable.[175] We need not unpack the psychological literature to make an obvious point: all people get bored, even virtuous people. And any theory that demands a complete lack of boredom would be psychologically untenable. So, can playful people become bored? Yes.

In fact, as an emotion, boredom is useful. Neo-Aristotelians demand that people pay attention to their emotions, and boredom feels bad. So, when virtuous people feel bad, they wonder what the source of the badness is. For virtuous people, feeling bad invites them to sit with and understand their emotions, to listen to what the emotions express.[176] In the case of boredom, the most common cause is people's situations, activities, or current life goals, such as long meetings, monotonous exercise, or saving money. If any of these things are unmotivating, unstimulating, or no longer cared about, people get bored, especially when forced to continue in these activities. Tangibly, this often moves bored people to explore the world, consider new experiences, or create meaning for their lives, activities, or goals.[177] Playful people try to change

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[175] Psychologists measure things like an emotion's valence, arousal, and responses, and they try to differentiate boredom from similar phenomena like monotony. See: Andreas Elpidorou, "The Bored Mind is a Guiding Mind: Toward a Regulatory Theory of Boredom," *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences*, vol. 17, iss. 3 (2018): p. 455-484. For a review of the debates about boredom, see: For a review, see: Richard P. Smith, "Boredom: A Review," *Human Factors*, vol. 23, iss. 3 (1981): pp. 329-40; Wijnand A. P. van Tilburg and Eric R. Igou, "Boredom Begs to Differ: Differentiation from Other Negative Emotions," *Emotion*, vol. 17, no. 2 (2017): pp. 309-22; and Cynthia D. Fisher, "Boredom at Work: What, Why, and What Then?" in: *The Social Functions of Emotion and Talking about Emotion at Work*, eds. Dirk Lindebaum, Deanna Geddes, and Peter J. Jordan (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2018), ch. 4. For a philosophical analysis of boredom, see: Wendell O'Brien, "Boredom," *Analysis*, vol. 47, no. 2 (Apr. 2014): pp. 236-44.

[176] In Aristotelian moral psychology, even though reason runs the show, emotions are important supporting actors. A fully virtuous person trains her emotions to feel good toward good things and bad toward bad things, and she cannot be fully virtuous unless she does this. If someone acts courageously without feeling good about it, she does the right thing, but she still needs to feel good about doing the right thing. And if she does the wrong thing but feels good about it, then she needs to change her feelings, in addition to her thoughts and actions. This demand issues from realizing that the best people in life not only do the right thing, they also feel appropriately. An added benefit of holistic psychological training is that in times when the mind does not quite understand things, emotions can indicate problems or resolutions. In cases where we are not sure what we think, properly cultivated emotions (and dispositions) can guide us.

[177] See: D. E. Berlyne, *Conflict, Arousal, and Curiosity,* McGraw-Hill Series in Psychology (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1960); Shane W. Bench and Heather C. Lench, "On the Function of Boredom," *Behavioral Sciences*,

their boredom by daydreaming, talking with others, or reevaluating the trajectory of their lives. The unease of boredom motivates them to deploy the skills involved in self-formation and community engagement, skills developed during leisure time activities. So, boredom, as an emotional state, is not bad for playful people; rather, it helps them to change suboptimal situations.[178]

Some might nonetheless worry about existential boredom, which differs from the state or emotion of boredom I discussed above. Many 19th Century writers, such as Arthur Schopenhauer, claim that boredom vexes us.[179] Schopenhauer laments, "Boredom is anything but an evil to be thought of lightly; ultimately it depicts on the countenance real despair."[180]

How does Schopenhauer arrive at such a grim conclusion? The most important psychological faculty for Schopenhauer is the will, a desire to have and experience things. For

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vol. 3 (2013): pp. 459-72; J. M. Barbalet, "Boredom and Social Meaning," *British Journal of Sociology*, vol. 50, no. 4 (Dec. 1999): pp. 631-46.

[178] Some critics worry that my theory seems to entail that people should maximize their leisure time, perhaps indefinitely with no upper bound. I am not sure whether there is any practical upper bound to the amount of leisure one can endure. If there is, I would gladly entertain it. But I will say that I do not see any near-future amount of leisure time as presenting difficulties to my theory. In fact, I tend to celebrate those who laud a future where we do not need specialized labor or commodified exchange to provide for ourselves, sometimes shown in science fiction with post-scarcity economies where people can dedicate their lives to hobbies, social relationships, and improving the world. Perhaps most relevant to the question of leisure time is something that Karl Marx discusses in his *German Ideology*. In it, he talks about the communist who does not specialize. Since society is run justly and everyone cooperates, everyone is free to hunt, fish, ranch, or write without ever needing to become a hunter, fisherman, rancher, or writer. (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 1998), p. 53. Captain Jean-Luc Picard also makes a similar point in *Star Trek: First Contact* (1996): "The economics of the future are somewhat different. You see, money does not exist in the 24th century. … The acquisition of wealth is no longer the driving force in our lives. We work to better ourselves and the rest of humanity." This is also the vision of utopia in Bernard Suits' *Grasshopper*. So, maybe there is a boundary to how much leisure we have or to how we should use it, but I do not see that boundary as existing yet.

[179] Other philosophers also talked about boredom: Martin Heidegger, Jean Paul Sartre, Søren Kierkegaard, and Erich Fromm. For a review of the history of boredom, see: van Tilburg and Igou, "Boredom Begs," pp. 309-10; and Marion Martin, Gaynor Sadlo, and Graham Stew, "The Phenomenon of Boredom," *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, vol. 3 (2006): pp. 193-5. Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* also serves as a 19th Century reflection on boredom.

[180] Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, trans. E. F. J. Payne, Vol. I (New York: Dover 1969), p. 313.

example, we feel the ache of hunger and the chafe of thirst, so we suffer as long as we cannot sate our desires. But then when we finally eat and drink, we do not feel happy in any positive sense. Rather, we only feel as though the suffering has stopped. And when we look outward while satisfied, we find everything devoid of meaning; there is nothing more to do and no desires left to satisfy, and nothing beckons our concern. The resulting boredom crushes us. For Schopenhauer, the will drives us forward in desire, and suffering motivates us to get the objects of our desire, but once we have them, we feel empty and lose interest. Most of life, our psyches are shot through with the pangs of desire; but even when we patch the holes, we feel only boredom. So, we are caught in a psychological dilemma: either (1) we desire and suffer until we attain our goods, or (2) we get all the goods we want and stop suffering, but then we succumb to boredom because our wills have no desires. This is existential boredom, the unpleasant feeling in the face of nothing to do and a void of meaning in life.[181] This trend of thinking is not exclusive to 19th Century continental thinkers either. Bernard Williams discusses a play by Karel Čapek that follows an immortal woman, Elina Makropulos. Considering Makropulos' immortality, Williams judges that boredom would emaciate and extinguish any meaning in an immortal's life,

[181] It is important to emphasize that, for Schopenhauer, there are no objective goods that have value apart from us wanting them; self-development, relationships, or engagement with religion cannot promise objective value any more than momentary pleasures or pains. Rather, everything only has meaning or desirability insofar as a person actively wants them. Moreover, happiness, for Schopenhauer, is only a negative experience, a state of not-suffering because the desires are sated. But because we cannot find any objective meaning, according to Schopenhauer, boredom weights on us. In fact, that we experience boredom after we sate our desires indicates that there are no further goals for life. Schopenhauer thus characterizes life as an oscillation between suffering and boredom. For Schopenhauer, boredom is more than an emotion that spurs our movement; boredom is a threat to our existence precisely because it shows how devoid of meaning our lives are. Schopenhauer, *World*, §§57-9. For a similar interpretation of Schopenhauer, see: Bernard Reginster, "Nietzsche's New Happiness: Longing, Boredom, and the Elusiveness of Fulfillment," *Philosophic Exchange*, vol. 37, no. 1, art. 2 (2006-7): pp. 17-25.

and he uses the Makropulos case as a springboard for thinking about how mortality contributes to meaning in life.[182]

Existential boredom should pose no threat to Neo-Aristotelians, however. We might feel it from time to time, but we should not get stuck there. If anything, existential boredom shows why it is important to get moral psychology and values right. For neo-Aristotelians, there are two sources of objective meaning in life: developing virtue and achieving happiness. Virtuous people always have something to do or some value to strive for.[183] Someone with existential boredom has the wrong mindset.[184] There could be cognitive error, for example, if he does not recognize his own potential to be happy or need to develop his character. But there could also be

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[182] Bernard Williams, "The Makropulos Case: Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality" in: *Problems of the Self: Philosophical Papers 1956-1972* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP), ch. 6. I think something neglected in conversations about immortality is the role of memory. With normal human faculties, things become new when we revisit them after forgetting them or letting time dull their reality. I think the same conclusions that Williams reaches might be reachable with memory-enhancement and augmented reality in a mortal life because they might allow us to experience more things than we would and everything might become mundane by comparison. That is, we might soon reach a technological future where Williams would be forced to say our technology is making our lives meaningless because we reach the same psychological states of the immortal. I disagree with Williams, but this is an important problem to confront.

It is also crucial to mention that Friedrich Nietzsche, while not talking about boredom, considers something similar in his vignette about the eternal recurrence. He imagines a demon coming to tell a person that he will have to relive his life exactly as he has without variation, over and over again. This carries with it not only the dread of reliving failures but also the doom of finding the most profound moments in life reduced to monotony and boredom. *The Gay Science*, trans. Josefine Nauckhoff (Cambridge: Cambridge UP), sec. 341.

[183] "Objectivity" in ethical values is difficult to explain. Virtue and happiness are not subjective concepts, and they seem to be something more than inter-subjective consensus. Objectivity seems to be grounded in a concept of human nature, something that all humans share simply by being part of the same species. But the values are revisable, and they must ultimately be useful in the pursuit of living well. So, neo-Aristotelians think ethical values are objective, but they are natural (rather than non-natural, such as with Thomas Nagel, Thomas Scanlon, or Derek Parfit), and they are corrigible. See: Rosalind Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1999), Pt. III.

Additionally, always having something to work toward does not mean imply that humans need to be perfect or have infinite ethical demands, as with Johan Gottlieb Fichte. (For a discussion of Fichte, see: Frederick C. Beiser, *German Idealism: The Struggle against Subjectivism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2002), p. 273 ff.) The literature is too wide to entertain here, but Thomas Hurka addresses many of the core puzzles relevant to perfectionism in: *Perfectionism* (New York: Oxford UP, 1993).

[184] This does not imply that changing mindset is easy. Rather, it diagnoses the problem. Neo-Aristotelians should think that existential boredom is a problem that people can get over with further psychological training, but it is not easy to undo bad habits or calm destructive emotions.

motivational error, where he knows the good things to pursue but fails to do it or be motivated by it. Aristotle discusses this extensively when addressing ἀκρασία, suitably translated for our discussion as "weakness of the will" (see: *EN* VII).[185] But more broadly, existential boredom could indicate vice. If a person feels no desire to improve himself, he is insensate. If he feels he is already good enough (but nonetheless existentially bored), he is arrogant. If he looks around his community and sees no one in need of generosity, friendship, or justice, he is unobservant of many character defects in himself. Any of these errors—cognitive, motivational, or dispositional—could lead to existential boredom. I agree with Schopenhauer that there is a problem with existential boredom. But it is not that people have too much leisure time or that playfulness as a theory is wrong. The problem with existential boredom is that the person fails to see the value of happiness or virtue, fails to be motivated by them, or displays some vice in the existential boredom, especially vices of social detachment.[186] For the virtuous person, there is always opportunity to self-reflect, love friends, or help others flourish. The virtuous person in any currently existing society could find sick to comfort, poor to feed, foreigners to welcome,

[185] Aristotle's theory of ἀκρασία separates him from strong intellectualist philosophers like Plato, who think that to know the good is to do the good. Aristotle thinks that is the case only for people with ἐγκράτεια, or proper power over their wills. But he notices that many people who do bad things know what they should have done instead, but they err nonetheless. Rather than seeing their ethical failing as a deficit of knowledge, he sees it as a deficit in motivation. *EN*, VII.

[186] Unfortunately, it might not be completely the fault of the existentially bored person that he is bored. His community and moral education might have failed him if they did not teach him to value the right things. This is why Aristotle (and most Greek traditions) stress the need for a good education and community. Often, by the time we are adults and struggling through things, we do so because we were raised with the values we have. We are products of our families, friends, institutions, traditions, and communities. Our happiness is vulnerable to the luck involved in each of them.

and downtrodden to visit.[187] And if a bored person does not feel that, then he needs to work on himself, not take it as a deep insight about the meaninglessness of life.[188]

Bertrand Russell comes to a similar insight after considering why so many people are unhappy today, especially people who have access to food, water, basic healthcare, and security. After reflecting on his life and how mathematics got him through suicidal thoughts in childhood, he concludes that one cure for unhappiness is finding genuine interests that take us outside of ourselves, as in hobbies and relationships.[189] Russell's advice applies here too. The existentially bored—savoring an abundance of leisure and suffering—are usually self-obsessed and without a

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[187] The existential boredom point goes beyond playfulness. Playfulness, strictly considered, deals with what happens in leisure time. And no doubt, playful activities can help to amend injustice. But in no way does my view entail that unjust societies require that there be no leisure. That is, just because there are ills to work on does not mean that we always have to work on them. The most sensible argument against this, I think, is that it is not psychologically feasible. It will lead to burnout. Leisure time needs to be preserved. Even with avid justice workers, the need to rest is there. Dorothy Day, for example, always had vacations on the beach, at which time she would not bother with work. This story was repeated by brothers of the Congregation of the Holy Cross, who dedicated their lives to service and with whom I lived for a year as an undergraduate at St. Edward's University in Austin, Texas. There is practical wisdom in that decision to guard vacation and rest time. Self-care and self-preservation are necessary for sustained efforts against injustice.

What this view does imply, though, is a weak unity of the virtues. (For a discussion of the unity of the virtues in Aristotle, see: Neera K. Badhwar, "The Limited Unity of Virtue," *Noûs*, vol. 30, no. 3 (Sept. 1996): pp. 306-29.) It appears virtues like moderation, friendliness, wit, and justice will be closely related to playfulness. And during leisure time, a virtuously playful person might need to call on those virtues because they become relevant. So, how then can all these interacting virtues be distinguished? I think each's relevant sphere of life distinguishes them. If a person is more concerned with social goods, it is friendliness or wit. If a person is more concerned about distribution of material goods in a community, it is justice. If a person is concerned about pleasure, it is moderation. Etc. Human life is complicated, and leisure might quickly give way to some other sphere of life, and *vice versa*. A consequence of this weak unity of the virtues is that it seems as though unjust, unfriendly, or immoderate people will have a hard time being virtuously playful throughout their lives. Certainly, some people will suggest counter examples like rock stars or artists. But I think those same lives, judged over the long term, show how problems with injustice, unfriendliness, and immoderation actually hamper their own ability to be good musicians or artists. Critics need only read about mid-life Elvis Presley and Michael Jackson, or rock stars past their primes.

[188] Or, as a Harvey Danger song says, "If you're bored, then you're boring." Aaron Huffman, Evan Sult, Jeff Lin, and Sean Nelson, "Flagpole Sitta," *Where Have All the Merrymakers Gone?* (Los Angeles: Slash, 1997). Existential boredom tells you more about the bored person than life itself, to riff on Pierre Bourdieu's insight that taste classifies the classifier and not art. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (London: Routledge, 2010).

[189] Bertrand Russell, *The Conquest of Happiness* (New York: Liveright, 2013), ch. 17.

community. They need to find ways to get outside of themselves. This is why the most frequent advice to treat mild depression is: sleep well, eat right, exercise, socialize, and appreciate what you have. None of this feels right when depressed, but when people do it anyway, they often find that the small goals and external focuses start to improve their mood.[190] Sometimes existential problems indicate a problem with the thinker, not the world. There are better and more justified ways of feeling on the neo-Aristotelian account.

I think Aristotle would use Schopenhauer's existential boredom to illustrate why Schopenhauer has the wrong theory of happiness. Aristotle and Schopenhauer could agree to the following hypothetical: if the primary psychological faculty of humans is the will, and if only extrinsic goods exist, then life is suffering or boredom. But where Schopenhauer uses *modus ponens* on that hypothetical, Aristotle uses *modus tollens*. For Aristotle, the suffering and boredom in life that exist are not what Schopenhauer observes, and this shows that Schopenhauer has the wrong moral psychology and the wrong ethical values. Oddly enough, Schopenhauer gets close to Aristotle's realization at times. He discusses Stoics who face misery tranquilly and geniuses use knowledge to free themselves from willing and suffering. But he ultimately finds these personalities rare or impossible. Schopenhauer also observes that people try to divert their suffering through religion and amusement.[191] So, he sees that other possibilities exist, but he nonetheless maintains his pessimism, misanthropy, and subjectivism. Schopenhauer's concern for existential boredom is important to address. But it shows how the wrong moral psychology

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[190] I do not mean to attack anyone who does not fit into a community due to conditions of injustice. But it seems to me that people who lack a community due to an unjust world are not feeling existential boredom. They are feeling something uncomfortable and necessary for community leaders to rectify. They are not feeling what Schopenhauer described. Also, the advice here obviously does not apply to more serious cases of depression or other mental illnesses.

[191] Schopenhauer, *Will*, §57, p. 315; §58, pp. 321, 322-3; §59, p. 325.

and ethical theory can resign people to needless suffering and boredom in life. Worship beauty, and you will always feel ugly; worship intellect, and you will always feel idiotic; worship desire, and you will always suffer or fail to feel lasting satisfaction. No one in life is an atheist, and the anxieties we fight reveal the demons in our hells, and the ways we renew ourselves reveal the gods in our heavens. Existential boredom, then, reveals more about the bored person than the nature of the world.[192]

Does the Constant Burden to Flourish Prevent Playfulness?

If people do not use their leisure time to improve themselves or their communities, then they cannot live a good life. That is the starkest way of stating my argument. This, no doubt, seems wrong to some critics. For some, it seems to give ethical stakes to the non-ethical.[193] For them, I have no answer that I have not already stated. For others, who agree that things like play and leisure have ethical stakes, it still might still seem too strong. Their criticism is that it gives an overarching obligation to always do something with leisure that undercuts the very freedom and renewal at the core of leisure and playfulness. The obligation to develop oneself and to flourish burden free time.

I have two answers to this objection. The first is harsh, and it is this: life just comes with obligations.[194] Aristotle knew this. It is an unsavory yet unavoidable truth of human life. If you

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[192] This is a play on some advice given by David Foster Wallace. "This is Water." Speech delivered at Kenyon College to the Class of 2005, Gambier, Ohio, May 21. Available at https://youtu.be/8CrOL-ydFMI.

[193] Susan Wolf worried about something similar when she argued that it is a fault whenever someone judges everything in life by a moral standard. Susan Wolf, "Moral Saints," *The Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 79, no. 8 (Aug. 1982): pp. 419-39.

[194] It is a debate in contemporary metaethics what "obligations" mean for neo-Aristotelians. Certainly, they are not as strict, absolutist, universal, or non-empirical as Kantian obligations. But they do still have some moral bindingness that demands people do certain things. For discussions, see: Hursthouse, *Virtue*, ch. 1. See also: Liezl

want to live a good life, you must do certain things (and no part of life is outside of ethical scrutiny). Even the most mundane things have ethical implications. The clothes you wear—where they were made, how, and what they signal to your community—can impact how you live. The food you eat—what it is made of, who prepared it, and whether it will lead to likely health problems—matters ethically. Even things you cannot control matter, such as genetic predispositions and reception by your community.[195] Blessing or curse, this just is what it means to live. It should be no surprise that our leisure time and playfulness come with similar considerations. This admission will certainly prevent some critics from listening, as they think this is an unintuitive and caustic ramification. Perhaps it is, but it does not make it any less true, and I cannot provide any further reason here for them to believe me.[196]

The second answer I have to the objection from burden is that the obligations we face are of different sorts. Compared to absolutist precepts, neo-Aristotelian obligations are light. Neo-Aristotelians begin by assuming that people are interested in their own happiness. And then they ask what kind of people they need to become to achieve happiness. This is subject to a lifetime of development and socio-historical particularities, and it is always answerable to practical experience. The standard is not divine law, universal law, or something abstract. The standard is whether people can actually live better lives. If someone does not live a better life by being virtuous, then the virtues dwindle in importance.[197] Ethics is practical; it tries to provide practical

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van Zyl, "Virtue Ethics and Right Action" in: *The Cambridge Companion to Virtue Ethics*, ed. Daniel C. Russell (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2013), ch. 8.

[195] Aristotle, for example, mentions that tyranny can prevent friendship (*EN* 1161a33-4).

[196] If you have made it this far, feel free to email me, and I will transfer you money for a drink on me.

[197] Hursthouse, *Virtue*, ch. 8. For an internal challenge to the idea that virtues benefit their possessors, see: Lisa Tessman, *Burdened Virtues: Virtue Ethics for Liberatory Struggles* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2005). She argues that virtues do not always benefit their possessors and might harm them sometimes. Especially in unjust or oppressive conditions, doing the right thing and being the right way come at costs to the virtuous. For a challenge that Aristotle

advice for guiding action. So, when I say that you will live a worse life if you do not have leisure and use that leisure to develop your own and your community's flourishing, I am making an empirical and testable claim as much as an ethical claim. This is the sense of obligation entailed.

My ideas might be proven wrong, specifically if there are examples enough to prove a trend for the following cases.

> Case 1: people live a life that others would choose, and that life only ever includes leisure spent in self-indulgent and other-disregarding activities.
> Case 2: people live a life that others would choose, and that life only ever includes leisure spent in the strictest and most ascetic of ways.

Case 1 is that of a person who is indulgent and wanton in their leisure, and my prediction is that this behavior would affect other areas of their lives, as well as diminish their own self-improvement and community strength. And these things would make them unhappy. Case 2 is that of a person who never stops working and enjoys few things. My prediction here would be that the person is harmed and not able to help others due to their commitment to their principles.[198] The neo-Aristotelian is betting that groups of people cannot live good lives without

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himself does not hold that virtues must benefit their possessors, see: Sukaina Hirji, "What's Aristotelian about Neo-Aristotelian Virtue Ethics?" *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, forthcoming.

The contrast with other theories is easy to see. For Kant, for example, he argues that you should always tell the truth to others, even if that person is murderous and asking where your friend is. Kant thinks the moral law always holds, and people ought to respect others' dignity and will, no matter what seems likely to follow. See: "On a Supposed Right to Lie Because of Philanthropic Concerns," in: *Ethical Philosophy*, 2nd ed., trans. James. W. Ellington (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994), pp. 162-6. Consequentialism also runs into similar problems of decreasing one's own utility to increase someone else's. The most popular example is: Peter Singer, "Famine, Affluence, and Morality," *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, vol. 1, no. 3 (Spring 1972): pp. 229-43. There, he argues that people ought to help others as long as it does not involve sacrificing anything of "comparable moral importance." P. 231. The problem is, when talking about helping others to avoid death, "comparable moral importance" is a high bar, entailing that many extreme sacrifices ought to be made. Both of these examples should illustrate that other ethical theories have higher demands in some ways. Kant would find all liars immoral. Singer would find it immoral not to sacrifice something to help others live, if at all possible (and it is easily possible with global effective charities). Neo-Aristotelians might say that doing these things is permissible, but they would not condemn someone morally for lying to the axe murderer or driving a car instead of donating that car payment to the Against Malaria Foundation (at least in some cases).

[198] Case 2, however, is much less a counter-example because it is possible that an ascetic and strict person does practice self-discipline and community development via commitment to principles. He might even serve as a didactic example or inspiration. It is also possible that, despite asceticism, he enjoys intellectual or spiritual

developing the virtues. Maybe an anomaly might exist here or there. But there should not be trends running counter to the general pattern of flourishing. Neo-Aristotelians make a practical bet that things will not turn out well for those lacking the virtues they espouse.[199] And this is the bet that I will make against these cases because I think playfulness constitutes part of a good life.

What the ethical scrutiny of leisure time gets us is some direction in how we use that leisure time. On the one hand, it means that we need to preserve it and value it highly. Since it is a necessary feature of a good life, it demands care. But, on the other hand, just because it demands care does not mean it is above scrutiny. An added benefit of this approach to playfulness is that all the individual criteria I proposed for playfulness get nested within concerns for virtue and flourishing. Seriousness, creativity, optimism, sociality, and relaxation can become morally destructive when taken on their own, but not if measured against virtue and flourishing. This approach simultaneously affirms the importance of leisure and its activities, while also keeping a critical edge for the way some 'goods' become bads when taken to extremes or when taken out of the context of a person's life and how it goes.

I take the neo-Aristotelian answer to this objection as a middle way between someone like Peter Singer and someone like Moritz Schlick. Peter Singer holds that all of our actions are

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pleasures and so relaxes or renews himself in some relevant way. That is, he might be playful. So, I am not sure if someone in Case 2 could exist, but it feels like it should be an extreme to avoid. That said, an example of Case 2 that fits my criteria of playfulness might count against my theory nonetheless because it presents an example that conflicts with the sense of the term "playfulness," a return to the broadness objection.

[199] This sense of obligation is what leads some people to say that neo-Aristotelians do not actually have duties, and that teleological ethics (e.g. neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics) cannot answer important theoretical concerns that deontological ethics can (e.g. Kantianism). For the debate, see: Rosalind Hursthouse, *Virtue*, ch. 1; Bernard Williams, "Acting as the Virtuous Person Acts" and Rosalind Hursthouse, "The Virtuous Agent's Reasons: a Reply to Bernard Williams," in: *Aristotle and Moral Realism*, ed. Robert Heinaman (Boulder: Westview P), 1995, pp. 13-33; Robert Louden, "On Some Vices of Virtue Ethics," *American Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 21, no. 3 (July 1984): pp. 227-36; and Frans Svensson, "Eudaimonist Virtue Ethics and Right Action: A Reassessment," *The Journal of Ethics*, vol. 14, no. 4 (Dec. 2011): pp. 321-39.

subject to the rational calculus of maximizing the good and minimizing the bad. It does not matter what we feel; it only matters that we do the right thing. No matter what part of yourself or community you are developing in leisure, if you can give time and money to effective charities, you should because saving their lives outweighs what you are likely doing for yourself in leisure.[200] Moritz Schlick represents the opposite view. For him, the very meaning of life exists in play. So, an implication is that play should be preserved above most (and perhaps all) other activities, and large costs to preserve and enjoy play are justifiable.[201] Neo-Aristotelians represent a middle way. Leisure and its activities are important, so there is nothing wrong in guarding them and spending goods on enjoying them. But, using leisure virtuously in no way justifies bourgeoise detachment that justifies hobbyists spending exorbitant money on things they barely use and probably use poorly compared to professionals. There are limits for what is appropriate, especially when it undermines self-improvement and community development.

Ultimately, the neo-Aristotelian theory of playfulness that I offered treats playfulness with respect. Neither hyperbolic praise nor unbridled hostility suffice. The truth about playfulness is complicated. Sometimes people use leisure to improve their lives and the lives of

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[200] Peter Singer has softened this view considerably. The moral obligation still exists to do the most good you can, and morally, it is wrong if you do not. But, in order to get people to buy into the program of effective altruism, he says to do what is psychologically feasible. Consider a couple that wants to pursue invitro fertilization to have a family, which would cost around $10,000. Singer thinks that it is wrong not to give that money to an effective charity that would literally save lives with that amount of money, and saving lives outweighs whatever goods would come from having children (quite substantially if we also add in the detrimental environmental impact of another Western child being born). But, recently, he has realized that such an all-or-nothing attitude with regard to moral obligations does not win many followers, which means that his causes lose support. So, he adds in psychological feasibility that allows people like this couple to pursue a family if it is important to them, especially if that means the couple will keep donating money to effective charities with other income. Rather than lose a follower and a lifetime of good they can do because the demands are too strict, he underemphasizes the demand and gets them to do the good they can. See: Peter Singer, *The Most Good You Can Do* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2015).

[201] Moritz Schlick, "On the Meaning of Life," trans. Peter Heath, in: *Philosophical Papers*, vol. II [1925-1936], ed. H. Mulder and Barbara F. B. van de Velde-Schlick (Dordrecht, Holland: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1979), pp. 112-29.

others; they are playful. Other times people use leisure for self-harm and social deterioration; they are not. But in all cases, we need to take responsibility for our leisure because it contributes to the cultivation of who we are and who we live with. Putting playfulness in the frame of happiness and virtue allows us to differentiate the good from the bad cases. If I am right, playfulness is no laughing matter, though playful people might rightly laugh. Playfulness is more than an ornamental stone atop a cathedral. It is a stone that bears weight and enables the architecture of a good, meaningful life to reach new heights and withstand all weather.

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