

I propose to use Diogenes Laertius' remark that in his youth Plato "was never seen to laugh with abandon" as the starting point for an investigation of the rôle of laughter in Plato's depiction of the Socratic circle. My investigation focuses on those passages throughout the dialogues in which a participant or observer of the conversation is said to have laughed, i.e. instances of "actual" laughter (within the parameters of the dramatic fiction established by the author).

This investigation requires a preliminary word of caution. We have reason to believe that Plato trusted his ancient audience to imagine characters laughing at statements or events that would have struck them as obviously ridiculous but may not seem so to us. In addition, Plato may at times have chosen not to include the listeners' laughing reponse for the sake of preserving dramatic unity. Therefore it is important to be aware that, even if we catalogue every instance of actual laughter in Plato's works, the resulting picture will nonetheless be somewhat distorted.

I believe that an investigation tracing instances of actual laughter throughout the Platonic dialogues can shed light on an important facet of the Socratic revolution. We rarely find a Platonic character laughing out of amusement at a joke as we would understand it; more frequently a burst of actual laughter seems to be an expression of scorn, and characters routinely cite fear of becoming the target of such laughter as a reason for their actions or inaction. Since the society which Plato describes bears many traits characteristic of a shame culture, we should not be surprised to see laughter regarded, and used, as a weapon. Although Socrates often speaks as if he too were afraid of appearing ridiculous and being laughed at, in a pivotal passage in the Republic he radically departs from cultural convention by dismissing this fear as childish. In his view the only justified cause is being derailed in the pursuit of truth. Consequently, Socrates at times even seeks to elicit a laugh at himself from his friends in order to , for example in order to lighten the gloomy atmosphere in the Phaedo when overpowering emotions threaten to bring the progress of their conversation to a stop. Thus I wish to argue that in some instances Socrates/Plato employs actual laughter, like so many other forms of playfulness ($\pi\alpha\iota\delta\iota\alpha$), in the service of a much greater goal, namely the care for one's soul ($\pi\alpha\iota\delta\epsilon\alpha$).