



# Playdough and Personality

## A High School Activity

Oliver Butterick

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### Introduction: Playdough Demonstration



In my experience, people of all ages like playdough, especially people who are not old enough to know not to eat it, and also people who have finished puberty (or at least are toward the end of it) who like to remember a time when they were not old enough to know not to eat playdough. There is a group in the middle (approximately ages 5–15) who don't want to be viewed as "little kids," and so tend to shy away from playdough. So, I shall revise my statement: People of *most* ages like playdough.

This activity can be modified based on the instructor's artistic inclinations and adeptness at manipulating playdough. I'll use a simple example, leaving more complex ideas for others to develop. You can open the activity by telling the class, "Today in philosophy class, we will be talking about playdough." (Just make sure that you say "playdough" to sound like "Plato.")

**Step 1:** Roll a chunk of playdough into a ball. Show the object to the class. You can ask them to identify the object, including its shape, color, and substance.

**Step 2:** Roll the playdough back and forth in your hands until it resembles a cylinder, or for a small piece, a string. Now, ask the class to again identify the object, including its shape, color and substance. If you want to get tricky (and I suggest this), add a bit of playdough of another color before rolling it into a cylinder. If you do this, make sure that you make it very obvious that you are still using the *same* piece of playdough, only with some new playdough added to it.

**Step 3:** Here's where the philosophy part comes in. Have the class take out their Philosophy Journals and write the heading, "Playdough and Personal Identity." Under this heading, ask them to answer the following

question: Are the ball and the cylinder essentially the same object, or different objects? Give reasons to justify your answer.

After the class has had a few minutes to write their answers, you can ask a few volunteers to share their answers. Make sure to get a few responses from each side of the issue: those who think it is the same, and those who think it is different. You may even want to write some of the reasons on the board for the two positions. Once a few students have shared, you can introduce the actual philosopher, Plato, by giving a few biographical details. (Note: Be sure to give general comments, just so the students can place him historically and geographically. The last thing we want is high school students memorizing Plato's vital statistics.)

### Reading: Excerpt from Plato's Symposium (207d–208b)

(From *Plato: Complete Works*, edited by John M. Cooper, p. 490–491)

You can have a few students take turns reading aloud, or perhaps one student who reads well aloud, since the segment is rather short.

*Even while each living thing is said to be alive and to be the same—as a person is said to be the same from childhood till he turns into an old man—even then he never consists of the same things, though he is called the same, but he is always being renewed and in other respects passing way, in his hair and flesh and bones and blood and his entire body. And it's not just his body, but in his soul, too, for none of his manners, customs, opinions, desires, pleasures, pains, or fears ever remain the same,*

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## Call for Submissions

The editorial board welcomes submissions by K-12 students for the next issue of *Questions: Philosophy for Young People*. Like the third issue, the next issue of *Questions* will be devoted to publishing the voices of young people engaged in thinking and discussion about a wide range of philosophical questions.

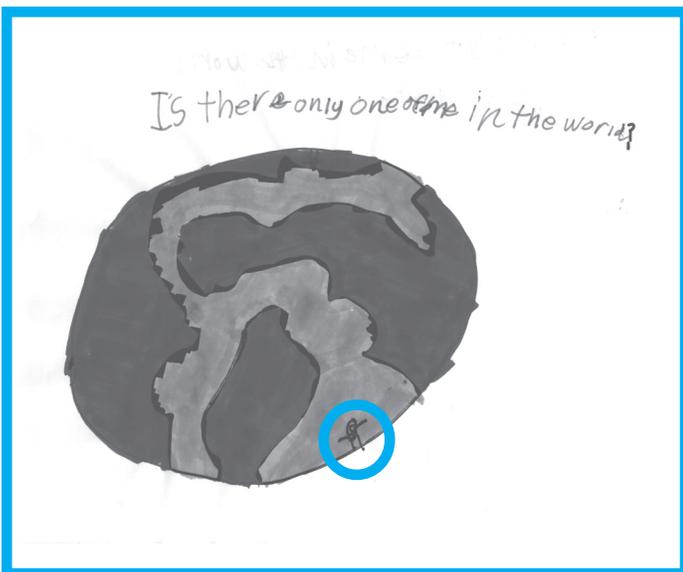
We are especially interested in pieces about the existence and nature of God, philosophy of art, and the nature of love. We will publish K-12 student philosophical stories, essays, poems, photographs, and drawings, photographs of students in philosophy sessions, transcripts of classroom philosophy discussions, and adult articles about doing philosophy with young people.

If you would like further information about participating in *Questions*, please contact the editor-in-chief at: [jmohrlone@hotmail.com](mailto:jmohrlone@hotmail.com)

Submissions for the next issue (except drawings and photographs) must be sent electronically, **by December 31, 2004**, to: [jmohrlone@hotmail.com](mailto:jmohrlone@hotmail.com)

Drawings and photographs can be sent to:

Dr. Jana Mohr Lone  
Northwest Center for Philosophy for Children  
Department of Philosophy  
University of Washington  
345 Savery, Box 353350  
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*"Is there only one of me in the world?"*

By Jordan Hertlein, Grade 3  
Methow Valley Elementary School, Winthrop, WA



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*but some are coming to be in him while others are passing away.*

*And what is still far stranger than that is that not only does one branch of knowledge come to be in us while another passes away and that we are never the same even in respect of our knowledge, but that each single piece of knowledge has the same fate. For what we call studying exists because knowledge is leaving us, because forgetting is the departure of knowledge, while studying puts back a fresh memory in place of what went away, thereby preserving a piece of knowledge, so that it seems to be the same.*

**Activity:** Once the text has been read, ask the students to come up with at least four philosophical questions inspired by the reading. After the students have come up with their questions, arrange them in groups of 3 or 4 to discuss their questions. Have each student read his questions to the group, encouraging the other members of the group to ask the author questions if they do not understand one of her questions. Once all students have read their questions to their group, the group should pick one question (or at the most two, when it is just too difficult to pick just one) to represent the group, and select a representative to write the question on the board.

Once all of the questions are on the board, ask each group to read and explain their question. If you want to increase the number of students actively participating, you can require that someone other than the original author reads the question and explains it. This will ensure that all members of the group understand the question themselves. Only if further clarification is necessary should the original author help out.

After all questions have been read and explained, the class will need to select one question to discuss. First, ask the class if they think that any of the questions can be combined into one question. For example: the questions, "Are we really just our memories?" "Are we really just our thoughts?" and "Are we really just our knowledge?" could be combined. It will all depend on whether the class thinks these are similar questions or not. Make sure to give suggestions on questions that can be combined, but let the class make the final decision.

Vote on your topic and begin discussing by having the original author explain the question again and give her thoughts on possible answers for the question. Make sure that each participant is offering reasons or an argument as to why their answer should be accepted. (Make sure to note other questions that got several votes, but were not selected for discussion. These may be good topics to explore in future

classes.) Toward the end of discussion, try to wrap it up by having a few students summarize what was discussed, particularly noting any philosophical progress that was made.

To close the class, ask the students to read what they wrote about Playdough, and ask them if anyone has changed their mind. You can also ask them to apply their reasons to persons, and whether their reasons are valid for personal identity. If time permits, allow another discussion, and wrap it up by having a few students summarize it.



*"Is life a dream or are dreams life?"  
by Marian Grace Tannehill, Grade 4  
Methow Valley Elementary School, Winthrop, WA*

**Why does the sky look blue?**

**Who made up math?**

**Why did God make different languages?**

**Why do people die?**