The "Serious Play" of Book 7 of Plato's Laws

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R. G. Bury begins the *Introduction* to his translation of Plato's *Laws* by stating that this work "lacks the charm and vigour of the earlier dialogues…[it] is marked also by much uncouthness of style, and by a tendency to pedantry, tautology and discursive garrulity which seems to point to the failing powers of the author."[i] Even without acceding to his suggestion that the inferior quality of this dialogue is due to Plato's diminished abilities, it is tempting to acknowledge Bury's description of the work. For the *Laws* does lack the sparkling density and playful irony of other dialogues. The Athenian is indeed pedantic and his long-winded discourse is remarkably laborious. Especially for a reader inspired by the endlessly provocative minimalism characteristic of Socrates in so many other dialogues, tackling the *Laws* is a terrible chore. For above all else, what characterizes the Athenian's speech is its sustained and relentless seriousness.

For this reason it comes as a surprise when, in Book 7, somewhere near the center of the dialogue, the Athenian says this: "Of course, the affairs of human beings are not worthy of great seriousness" (megavlhı spoudh~ı)" (803b). A few lines later he continues:

> I assert that what is serious should be treated seriously, and what is not serious should not, and that by nature god is worthy of a complete blessed seriousness, but that what is human, as we said earlier, has been devised as a certain plaything (paivgnion) of god, and that this is really the best thing about it. Every man and woman should spend life in this way, playing (paivzonta) the most beautiful games (paidiavı)" (803c).[ii]

In this, the apparently least playful of all Plato's dialogues, we find what might be his most emphatic praise of play.

Now, as some of you might have already recognized, in the first citation above I truncated the line. For immediately after saying, "the affairs of human beings are not worthy of great seriousness," the

Athenian finishes the sentence with, “yet (`ge mhvn`) it is necessary (`ajnagkai~ovn`) to be serious about them. And this is not a fortunate thing” (`oujk eujtucevı`: 803b).[iii]

Unfortunately, human beings are constrained by some sort of necessity to be serious about what is not worthy of being taken seriously; namely, ourselves. This is odd. How can I take seriously what I know is not worthy of such treatment? I can, of course, fake it. At least according to Alcibiades in the *Symposium*, this is precisely what Socrates does. He “lives his whole life being ironic and playing (`paivzwn`) with human beings” (216e). He pretends, for example, to be taken by, and so to take seriously, beautiful young men like Alcibiades (and Charmides and Euthydemus [222b]), while in fact he “holds them in contempt” (`katafronei~`: 216d) and counts them as “nothing” (`oujdevn`: 216e).[iv] And it is arguable that in the *Republic* he pretends to be interested in developing a serious model of a just human city, whereas in fact his real intention in this dialogue may instead be to “found a city within himself.” As he puts it, “it doesn’t make any difference whether it is or will be somewhere” (592b). It is possible, therefore, that his genuine concern in this dialogue may be not for the *polis*, but for the well-being of the individual philosophical soul.

The magnitude of the Athenian’s speech, and his consistently painstaking and often painful demeanor, surely seems to militate against the possibility of him faking it. Furthermore, the Athenian is conversing with Kleinias, a man charged by his fellow Cretans with an important task: to establish the laws for a new colony (702c). Unlike the hypothetical city-planning of the *Republic*, a venture that Socrates likens to a “dream” (443b) and describes as “playful” (536c), a venture that is in explicit service not to a political project but instead to the task of convincing two young men, Glaucon and Adeimantus, that the just life is superior to the unjust life (368c), here in the *Laws* there’s a genuine piece of city-business to transact: assisting the founder of Magnesia.

So, the question must be asked again: how, if he’s not faking it, does the Athenian manage to take seriously what he knows to be unworthy of seriousness? What sort of “necessity” constrains him to maintain the earnest, grave, methodical approach he adopts, and how, from a psychological point of view, does he manage to pull this off?

Before pursuing this question by examining material from Book 7 of the *Laws*, consider another passage from the *Republic.* Recall that in telling his story of the cave Socrates insists that the liberated prisoners who have made it to the upper world and seen the sun will not be allowed to remain aboveground. Instead, he "compels" them to return to the cave and there to participate fully in political affairs. Variant of the word he uses here, ajnavgkasai (516c), are repeated at least 6 times in this passage (500d, 519e, 520a, 520e, 521b, 539e, 540b), and to its implication Glaucon forcefully objects: "What?...Are we to do them an injustice, and make them live a worse life when a better is possible for them?" (519d). As commentators have understood, "the fate of the *Republic* hangs" on how this passage is interpreted.[v] For Strauss, it implies a conceptual incoherence and therefore tokens the impossibility of the perfectly just city.

> Only the non-philosophers could compel the philosophers to take care of the city. But, given the prejudice against the philosophers, this compulsion will not be forthcoming if the philosophers do not in the first place persuade the non-philosophers to compel the philosophers to rule over them, and this persuasion will not be forthcoming, given the philosphers' unwillingness to rule. We arrive then at the conclusion that the just city is not possible because of the philosophers' unwillingness to rule.[vi]

For Strauss, it is impossible to make sense of the "necessity" invoked in the story of the cave. As a result, the efficacy, and the seriousness, of Socrates' putative exercise in city-planning must, by his lights, be called into question.

By contrast, the necessity to be serious invoked at *Laws* 803b is different, for it does not require the non-philosopher to compel an unwilling philosopher to rule. Instead, it emerges from a self-recognition on the part of the Athenian; it is self-imposed. Even if human beings are not worthy of the greatest seriousness, he must, the Athenian tells himself, take them seriously. If this is a misfortune, so be it. Once again the standard picture of an old Plato writing the *Laws*, one who, perhaps unlike the author of the *Republic*, is resigned to the misfortune of being human, being political, does not seem out of order.

In any case, back to Book 7 of the *Laws*. The Athenian explains why human beings are not worthy of great seriousness. Not only are we “playthings” of the gods, as he had said earlier, we are their “puppets” (qaumavta) and as such we share only “in small portions of truth” (804b).[vii] To this statement Megillus replies with indignation: “Stranger,” he says, “you are belittling (diafaulivzeiı) our human race in every respect!” (804b5). The Athenian responds:

> Don’t be amazed (qaumavsh/ı), Megillus, but forgive me! For I was looking away toward the god and speaking under the influence of that experience, when I said what I did just now. So let (e[stw) our race by something that is not lowly (fau~lon) then, if that is dear (fivlon) to you, but worthy of a certain seriousness (spoudh~ı dev tinoı) (804b).

In effect, the Athenian has just said to Megillus, “okay, if that’s the way you want it, I take it back. Let human affairs be taken seriously.”

This line is reminiscent of the bit of banter that precedes Aristophanes’ speech in the *Symposium*. The poet, you recall, has been hiccuping throughout Eryximachus’ rather pedantic analysis of Eros. When the good doctor finally finishes speaking, Aristophanes starts to poke fun at him by recounting the sneeze cure that he has just successfully applied. Eryximachus objects: “Good Aristophanes,” he warns, “watch what you’re doing.” Aristophanes cheerfully relents: “well said, Eryximachus! So let (e[stw) what was said by me be unsaid” (189b3-4). Perhaps this sentence can function as the motto for comedy itself. Anything said can just as easily be unsaid, because nothing said by human beings is worth being taken seriously.

In a similar fashion, the Athenian in the *Laws* is willing to “unsay” what he has just said; namely, that “human affairs are surely not worthy of the greatest seriousness.” If this statement is so easily retracted was he, then, not serious when he made it? If so, then he is being deliciously self-referential. The Athenian does not treat his own statement, “human beings are not worthy of the greatest seriousness,” very seriously.

Unfortunately, however, a more nuanced reading is in order. In responding to Megillus, the Athenian does not simply retract his original statement, for he says that human beings ***are*** worthy of “a certain (tinoı) seriousness." In other words, even if we do not merit the "greatest seriousness" it may still be both possible and necessary to treat human affairs with a qualified or second-tier seriousness. As with so many other matters in the *Laws,* seriousness can be hierarchically stratified. While it is true that when one "looks away towards the god"—in other words, when one is being maximally philosophical—human affairs can be dismissed as merely playful. But when one is faced with a tough, civic-minded Spartan, and a Cretan charged with founding a colony, when one's gaze is resolutely horizontal rather than vertical, then a "certain seriousness" is required. Indeed, it is "necessary." And it is generated by the recognition of the essential predicament of the human race: we are, unfortunately, human. This means that although, as Kleinias strongly maintains in Book 1, we are a bellicose lot prone to fighting among and even within ourselves (see 625e and 626d), we must work hard to figure out the best way to organize our political lives.[viii]

Keeping this in mind, we now can see that although the Athenian seemed to engage in a comic unsaying of what has been said, his invocation of the unfortunate necessity to apply a "certain seriousness" to human affairs might be better construed as tragic. Whether we wish to or not, we must squarely face the fate that fortune has allocated to us and take our humanity seriously.

Because the Athenian's remarks about play spark these kind of reflections, it should come as no surprise that later in Book 7 he has a bit to say about both tragedy and comedy. He imagines the tragic poets, whom he describes as "serious" (spoudaivwn), coming into his city and asking, "Strangers, shall we frequent your city and territory or not? And shall we carry and bring along our poetry?" (817a). The Athenian is not particularly inviting in response. "Best of strangers," he says to the tragedians, "we ourselves are poets, who have to the best of our ability created a tragedy that is the most beautiful and best; at any rate, our whole political regime is constructed as the imitation of the most beautiful and best way of life, which we at least assert to be really the truest tragedy" (817b). Presumably the very "myth" (812a) of the laws that the Athenian has been reciting is the truest tragedy because it is generated precisely by the recognition that we must treat our humanity with a "certain," less-than-greatest, seriousness. Although we are equipped with reason and so, at our optimal state, we can theorize about matters divine, because we have bodies and so need to eat and sleep, because we must live in cities and our time on earth is short, we can never do this continually, fully or even adequately. Hence, we must act as if human life, in all of its petty detail, is meaningful and beautiful, when, as one who looks away to the divine understands, it might not be. The Athenian recommends that we impose this recognition upon ourselves.

Because the city itself, or at least the Athenian's "sketch" (803a) of its laws, is already tragic, the tragic poets may well be superfluous. As a result, the Athenian forces them to audition for entrance. Their work will have to be approved by the city's censors and only "if the things said by [them] are evidently the same, at least, or better [than the song we have sung], will we give you a chorus" (817d).

By contrast, the comic poets are immediately granted admittance to the city. For they have an essential pedagogical and civic function to perform. The Athenian explains: "For someone who is going to become prudent can't learn the serious things without learning the laughable, or, for that matter, anything without its opposite" (816d). In this altogether serious city, comedy is required, even if for negative reasons: "one should learn about the ridiculous things just for this reason—so that he may never do or say, through ignorance, anything that is ridiculous, if he doesn't have to" (816e). As a result, comedies will be performed only by slaves and hired foreigners, so that serious-minded citizens will not be infected by the ridiculous behavior that is imitated on stage and the language that is there recited. To reiterate: comedy has a serious role to play. Citizens must learn what it is to be ridiculous so that they do not have to be. Therefore, the Athenian states "let the play (paigniva) we all call 'comedy' be thus ordained in law and in argument" (816e).

(Note that the word that Pangle here translates as "play" (paigniva) is closely related to the one used at 803c when the Athenian says that the human race has been "devised as a plaything (paivgnion) of the god." For this reason, Liddel & Scott, citing "Plat. Legg. 816e," offer not only "toy or plaything" as the meaning of the latter, but also "comic performance, comedy." Perhaps, then, 803c should then be translated as "the comedy of the gods?")

There is one odd note in this brief discussion of comedy: a citizen should never do or say anything ridiculous "if he doesn't have to" (mhde;n devon: 816e5). This suggests that there might be some circumstance in which it is proper or needful for a citizen to be ridiculous. There might be occasions when it is appropriate to occupy or imitate "a shameful (or ugly) body" or entertain a shameful or ugly or lowly "thought" (816d). But what would such occasions be? I can only guess.

In order to treat human affairs properly, one must take them with a certain, qualified, seriousness, for in reality they are not worthy of the greatest seriousness. As the Athenian puts it in Book 4—where he decisively revises the Protagorean dictum—god, and not human being, "is the measure of all things" (716c). It is, therefore, a fundamental mistake to absolutize anything human. Obvious instances of such erroneous thinking would be excessive love of the body, of money, and of the city itself. It is imperative, therefore, to treat human affairs and the city with only a "certain seriousness" rather than the "blessed seriousness" that the gods merit. We must keep the divine in view in order to identify properly the true status and worth of human beings. Nonetheless, one must be cautious about acting like the Athenian, who in a moment of inspired exuberance "looks away toward the god." For in doing this one risks becoming more like the Socrates described by Alcibiades; a man who who holds fellow human beings in contempt. The Athenian and we readers must thus force ourselves to lower our gaze, but not entirely to lose sight of what is above us. It is for this reason that comedy, unlike tragedy, plays an essential role in the city. It reminds the citizens, who even though they are not allowed actually to perform in comedies are required to attend them, that they are puny, ugly, shameful, ridiculous creatures. This innoculating but superficial dose of self-ridicule, administered from the distance of the stage, is necessary to keep political affairs, which are regulated by the "truest tragedy" that is the laws, in proper perspective.

To amplify this point, I turn next to the very beginning of Book 7. Here the Athenian announces that he will discuss “nourishment” (trofhv) and “education” (paideiva: 788a).[ix] He begins with policies that apply to pregnant mothers, infants, and very young children. The general principle he assumes is that “all bodies are benefited when they are moved in an invigorating manner by all sorts of shakings and motions” (789d). This is because such motions facilitate digestion, which in turn promotes the good growth of the young. Therefore, pregnant women will be advised to walk, and infants will be carried by their mothers continually. It is, as the Athenian puts it, beneficial for the very young “to dwell as if they were always on a ship at sea” (790d). His evidence for the soundness of this proposal is the simple observation that mothers lull their restless children to sleep by rocking them continually in their arms and singing to them (790e). Motion generates rest.

Behind this simple observation, however, the Stranger offers a more general principle. He compares the rocking of a fussy baby to the Bacchic revelers who, through the therapeutic powers of disciplined and repetitive music and dance, restore equanimity to, who cure, themselves. “In both cases,” the Athenian explains, “the passion being experienced is presumably terror” (deimovı: 790e), and “when someone brings a rocking motion from the outside to such passions, the motion brought from without overpowers the fear and the mad motion within and, having overpowered it, makes a calm stillness appear in the soul that replaces the harsh fluttering of the heart” (791a).[x]

The passion felt by Bacchic revelers is caused by “a poor (fauvlhn) disposition (e{xin) of the soul” (790e). They have given themselves to the god and so have lost sight of their own humanity. By contrast, infants are too young to have been habituated to much of anything. Their terror, therefore, must be of some primal sort that lies buried deep within the human body. The therapy an infant receives is the repetitive back-and-forth rocking of a mother or a nurse. Rhythmic rocking counteracts the fierce palpitations of primal terror. If a baby is improperly raised, if it is not rocked to sleep, then this terror will be allowed to fester and grow unchecked, and the result would be cowardice. Courage, by contrast, is “triumphing over” terror (791c). Repetitive motion and sound, the singing of the mother or nurse, thus inculcates the infant with, or at least provides the bodily preconditions for, courage.

This discussion of baby-care seems both vaguely plausible and rather trivial. In fact, however, its central image, of rocking, oscillation, back-and-forth, back-and-forth, might useful to keep in mind when reading the *Laws*. More specifically, it might be useful in accounting for the serious play, or the playful seriousness, that the Athenian Stranger, in the passage discussed above, recommends.[xi] To elaborate, consider the following examples.

First, when the Athenian begins his discussion of the upbringing and education of children, he urges his companions to adopt the proper—that is, not entirely serious--attitude to such trivial matters. On the one hand, "to avoid speaking about this is completely impossible." How a child is raised will have significant consequences for the city. On the other, it would be absurd to develop precise legislation dictating how many rocks per minute a baby should receive, or how it should be swaddled. In lieu of making such laws the Athenian recommends a "middle" (metaxuv: 822d7) way; namely, a kind of instruction (didach/~) and admonition" (nouqethvsei: 788a), and the development of a set of "unwritten customs" (a[grafa novmima: 793b). As he later puts it, as he looks back at the child-rearing practices he has recommended throughout Book 7, "we assert that these things shouldn't be left unmentioned, but that to suppose, in speaking about them, that thay are being laid down as laws would be great folly" (ajnoivaı: 822d-e). It would be foolish to take human affairs so seriously that every aspect of human life, especially those concerning children, became matters of pinpoint legislation. In general, it would be "unseemly" (ajschvmwn) for a lawgiver to speak of the "many little and frequent details regarding the management of a household" (807e).

Second, consider the at times wonderful oscillation of the topics that the Athenian treats. For example, almost immediately after discussing the teaching of astronomy, whose subject matter is the "great gods, Sun and also Moon" (821b7)—which, contrary to popular opinion, are not "wanderers" (821b7) but instead "always move in the same circular path" (822a5)—the Athenian addresses hunting. He recommends that the following "prayer" be given to the young people of the city:

> O friends, may you never be seized by a desire or an erotic love for hunting on the sea, for angling, or in general for hunting of the animals that dwell in water, or for those basket-traps that perform the toil of a lazy hunt, whether the hunters are asleep or awake! (823e).

After the righteous speech about astronomy, it’s hard to read this, especially out loud—and especially in Pangle’s translation—without cracking up. But immediately after this impassioned plea not to use basket-traps, the Athenian turns to a more serious subject:

> May there never come over you a longing for the catching of humans by sea, and piracy, and may you never thus be made cruel and lawless hunters! May it never enter your minds in the least to engage in theft, in the countryside or in the city!

And then, this marvelous oscillation:

> May a seductive, erotic love of bird-hunting, which is hardly a liberal pursuit, never come over any of the young! (823e).

A third example is the Athenian’s treatment of leisure. After developing political arrangements so that “matters pertaining to the arts were handed over to others”—in other words, so that food, shelter, clothing and all the material requirements of life are provided without the labor of the citizens—the Athenian asks, “what then would be the way of life of human beings for whom the necessities were taken care of?” (806d). How, in other words, would citizens, “who are not lacking in leisure” (ajscolivaı: 807c7), spend their time? But this formulation is misleading, for in fact the citizens have no leisure since the Athenian recommends that “there should be a schedule (tavxin) regulating how all the free men spend all their time, beginning almost at dawn and extending to the next dawn and rising of the sun” (807e). Free time in this city isn’t all that free. In a similar play (paivzein: 797b2), the topic of much of Book 7, isn’t all that playful since it is entirely regulated by the authorities. It is imperative, the Athenian says, that “the same persons always play at the same things” (797a).

A final example is found in following statement made by the Athenian as he tries to determine what literature will be made available in the city.

> As I looked now to the speeches we've been going through since dawn until the present—and it appears to me that we have not been speaking without some inspiration from gods—they seemed to me to have been spoken in a way that resembles in every respect a kind of of poetry. It's probably not surprising for me to have had such a feeling, to have been very pleased at the sight of my own speeches, brought together, as it were; for compared to most of the speeches that I have lerarned or heard, in poems, or poured out in prose like what's been said, these appeared to me to be both the most well-measured, at any rate, of all, and especially appropriate for the young to hear. I don't think I would have a better model than this to describe for the Guardian of the Laws and Educator (811c-d).[xii]

Is this a moment of monumental self-congratulation? Is this passage meant to be the speech of a pompous and overly serious character, the sort that is regularly lampooned in comedy? It is difficult to tell from Pangle's wooden, monotonic translation. It is useful to cite the Saunders' version of the same passage, the one that Pangle objects to so fervently, for comparison:[xiii]

> You see, when I look back now over this discussion of ours, which has lasted from dawn up till this very moment—a discussion in which I think I sense the inspiration of heaven—well, it's come to look, to my eyes, just like a literary composition. Perhaps not surprisingly, I was overcome by a feeling of immense satisfaction at the sight of my 'collected works,' so to speak, because, of all the addresses I have ever learned or listened to, whether in verse on in this kind of free prose style I've been using, it's *these* that have impressed me as being most eminently acceptable and the most entirely appropriate for the ears of the younger generation. So I could hardly commend a better model than this to the Guardians of the Laws in charge of education.

Saunders' "my 'collected works,' so to speak" translates lovgouı oijkeivouı oi|on aJqrovouı (811d1), and sounds funny. Pangle's "my own speehces, brother together, as it were" is perhaps more literal, but it is deadly serious. If the thesis of this paper is correct, then at least in this one case, Saunders should get the nod.

Notes

[i] (Bury, p. vii).

[ii] Modified Pangle.

[iii] Dennistion (p. 348) on ge mhvn: adversative, often answering mevn.

[iv] The ascent passage dictates that we hold single bodies, individauls, in contempt.

[v] (Brown, 2000, p.2)

[vi] (Strauss, 1978, p. 124).

[vii] (Same word as the "puppets" whose shadows are cast on the wall of the cave in *Republic* Book 7: 514b. Laws 658c.) 644d: let's consider each citizen to be a divine puppet, "put together either for their play (paivgnion) or for some serious purpose (spoudh/~) which, we don't know." We onlh know that we're composed of cords and tendons/passions that can be pulled in either direction.

[viii] Human and divine necessity: 818b

[ix] Play and paideia: 643d: education draws the soul of the child at play towards an erotic attachment to virtue. 643e: education makes one desire and love to become a perfect citizen.

[x] Saunders explains: "*Corybantic conditions*: Frenzied pathological states accompanied by a strong desire to dance…The condition was cured homoeopathically by the *disciplined* music and dancing of Corybantic ritual" (p. 517).

[xi] My article on Euthydemus

[xii] "this myth of mine" (812a)

[xiii] Cite Pangle on Saunders.