On the Seriousness of Play or
The Importance of Not Being Earnest

Commencement Address for the Graduate Institute
5 August 2016

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Graduates, friends and relatives of graduates, visitors and colleagues—welcome!

It is a pleasure to speak to you graduates on this joyous occasion. Congratulations. You have completed your labors in the graduate program. I trust they were labors of love. I know several of you from our preceptorials over the last four summers. One of you, Ms. Andrea Howard, I know as an advisee, who wrote her master's essay on Dante's Ulysses, the great adventurer and symbol of unbounded human aspiration and the eternal thirst for knowledge. Ulysses tells of his sad end in the *Inferno*. Our preceptorials together, I hope you will agree, were not sad in the least but were instead happy adventures that took us to different worlds and to different, even opposing, views of human life.

Four summers ago I traveled with some of you through the dark world of Virgil's *Aeneid*, the poem that sings less of Rome's coming glory and more of the *lacrimae rerum*, the tears of things. Then there was the seemingly dispassionate world of Spinoza's *Ethics Geometrically Demonstrated.* Spinoza gave moral purpose to the geometric mode familiar to you from Euclid's *Elements*. He used the geometric mode as rhetoric meant to take us beyond all tears, anger, hatred, self-indulgence, error, prejudice and partisanship through the austere tutelage of discursive reason. Reason, cool reason, provided release from our bondage to passion and freedom in the unflinching recognition of natural necessity. The next summer it was Dante's political thought, or, more broadly, Dante's

reflections on community. After a brief look at Dante's treatise on world-government, we joined the poet on his voyage through Hell, Purgatory and Paradise. Dante sought to overcome and invert Virgilian tragedy and the tears of things. As the celebration of hope based on the guidance of reason and on faith in God's providential care for the world, Dante's poem bore, appropriately, the one-word title: *Comedy*.

This summer I joined four of you on a journey through the world of Plato's dialogues on love, the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*. It was very enjoyable. Thanks to Plato's magic we were guests at Agathon's house, where Love was praised, and joined Socrates and Phaedrus on the grassy knoll under the plane tree, where the two friends refreshed themselves, as we did, with discourse about love, non-love, divine madness and discourse itself. These Platonic worlds offered many sources of wonder and perplexity. What is Eros? What does it mean to be erotic, and to be "in love"? Is it a good thing, or a bad—an ordering or a disordering experience? And how can it be that even the most bodily and irrational love, as Diotima teaches the young Socrates, points beyond itself, upward, to the highest love of all, the love of wisdom? These were but a few of the questions that baffled and enticed us.

This summer a student in our preceptorial (not a graduate) generously allowed me to read his application essays. I was deeply moved by their seriousness. The student had acquired much life experience before coming here, some in another country, and, like several of you, is a teacher. He came to this college because he wanted to be a better teacher, a better guide for his fellow human beings, by becoming a better learner. You all came here because you were serious about learning. As adults with families, careers and responsibilities, you made personal sacrifices that most of our undergraduates do not

need to make, all for the sake of your education not as scholars but as human beings. That's how serious you were, and are.

In tribute to the serious decision that brought you here and the seriousness of genuine learning, I want to reflect briefly this morning on the other, complementary side of liberal learning. I am speaking of *play* and *playfulness*, in Greek *paidia*, from the word for boy or child, *pais*. The Greek word for education, *paideia*, has the same origin and closely resembles the word for play. Hence the title of my talk: On the Seriousness of Play or The Importance of Not Being Earnest.

Play abounds in the Platonic dialogues. In the first dialogue you read here, Socrates plays cat and mouse with Meno, and even with the slave boy, whom Socrates all but pushes into making an initial mistake about the double square. Playfulness is prominent in the *Phaedo*, where Socrates, in his last conversation with his friends before he drinks the fatal hemlock, exhibits an endearing humor, grace and lightness of being. He does not wear the cloak of great-souled gravitas that we might think fits a philosopher about to meet his end. Socrates' playfulness is music meant to ward off the fear of death and the specter of unphilosophical seriousness. The elaborately contrived "best city" in the *Republic* is meant in play. Not an ideological blueprint for political revolution, it is high-level make-believe that shows what sort of city you get if you pursue perfect justice with a vengeance. Those of you who were in the mathematics and natural science segment this summer encountered the playfulness of the *Timaeus*, where mathematical physics is said to be a likely story, that is, a form of rational and ennobling play.

In the *Symposium* the wine of play, like the wine of speech, flows freely. All the banter, teasing, punning and mock accusations that are rampant in this dialogue are a

form of play, and at least one speech, Agathon's, is playful in the extreme and consists almost entirely of word play. In the *Phaedrus*, the written word or book, which we tend to regard as more serious than the spoken word (think "great book") is said to be a form of play. In Socrates' playful critique, a book is not the serious attempt to lead a particular soul to truth (that is the goal of the spoken word) but the random planting of idea-seeds in the garden of Adonis in the heat of summer. What serious writer would do that?

In his Sixth Letter Plato makes the claim that playfulness and seriousness are *sisters* (323D). That is, they have a common root or parent. Seriousness and play, in their sisterly opposition, are intimately related. What can this mean, and how does it apply to your serious application to serious things while you were here?

I hope you will forgive me if to answer this question I turn to one of Plato's most forbidding dialogues, the *Parmenides*, which is all about the philosophic importance of play. In this dialogue a very young Socrates, clearly proud of himself, puts forth his "theory of the Forms." He has come up with this theory in order to *stave off* contradiction and paradox. Socrates here is very different from the mature Socrates we know from other dialogues. He is idealistic, dogmatic, fearful of saying something nonsensical, and earnest. In other words, he is young. The old Parmenides mops up the floor with Socrates and his theory. He does so not because he thinks the theory is false (he doesn't) but because Socrates, in his serious but premature quest for stable truth through definition, hasn't thought through the logical implications of his own theory. He has not wrestled with himself, explored his own paradoxes, and has therefore not yet become a complete lover of wisdom. To remedy this deficiency, Parmenides displays the dazzling game of investigating all permutations of a given hypothesis, any hypothesis. His example is his

own cherished (one might say sacred) teaching that Being is One. By choosing his very own One as the thing to be interrogated and treated roughly, as though it were the subject of comedy, the old philosopher shows Socrates how to be young in a way that advances rather than impedes his philosophic growth. He is teaching the all-too-earnest Socrates how to be playful in the serious pursuit of truth—how to moderate the urgency of that pursuit while he is still young and strengthen his logistical powers of playing "what if" by examining all sides of a given topic. Socrates must learn to *enjoy* rather than *fear* the play of opposites and the paradoxes that lurk within the realm of Forms, for these are the things that summon thought. Socrates must learn and practice the truth of what Kierkegaard says in his *Philosophic Fragments*—that a thinker without a paradox is like a lover without passion.

In all your conversations in your classes you too were given the opportunity to be young again. You were encouraged, and encouraged yourselves, to let the books help you make new beginnings, to regard the familiar as strange, to entertain and examine hypotheses and give free rein to the liberating spirit of intelligent play. Like young Socrates you came with cherished opinions and beliefs—your own personal "theory of the Forms"—and, like him, you exposed yourself to the rigorous examination of those beliefs, especially perhaps in seminar. The point of such examination was not to undermine or cause you to reject the views you came with, though in some important ways you surely were transformed, but to inspire the search for greater clarity and depth regarding those beliefs, some of which may indeed have changed. You were here not primarily to acquire familiarity with or even deep understanding of books by great authors, wonderful as that is, but to activate your philosophically erotic quest for truth

and your effort at greater self-knowledge. For it must be said that the goal of true education is not the reading and understanding of books but the *insights* to which books and conversations might lead. To have read Euclid is a fine thing. But far more beautiful and far more important to see and understand *why* the interior angles of a triangle add up to two right angles. This is genuine recollection, which Socrates defines in the *Meno* as "reasoning of the cause or ground." This process of recollection applies to your own opinions. Reading the books and engaging in conversation gave you the opportunity to better understand the causes and grounds of your opinions and most cherished beliefs, and to discover and come to terms with paradoxes of your own.

You could not have done this serious and difficult thing without a willingness to play—to bracket the serious business of life, to step back from what you hold most dear in order to see it more clearly, to let all sorts of ideas and questions come up in discussion, to see where they might lead, whether in support of something you thought was true or the opposite, and, above all, to banish the fear of being wrong. In your tough grappling with the books and with your own opinions, you were not alone. Everyone else in your classes, including your tutor, was engaged in the same serious play, the same good-natured willingness to set a conversation in motion, keep it afloat, and go wherever the logos might lead. Play, the communal play that we engage in, cultivate and enjoy at this college, the play that is the trueborn sister to the true seriousness, is not a frill of education but a human and humanizing *virtue*. It is this beautiful play, for beautiful it is, that promotes patience and a most discerning tolerance not only with things in books that strike us as wrong or even offensive but also with ourselves and others. The spirit of play makes us gentler and more communal. It softens the hard edge of dogmatic asseveration.

Without play, education could not be liberal, that is, liberating. For one of the things from which we self-important creatures must be liberated is taking ourselves too seriously—something the mature Socrates never does.

I want to give you a playful sendoff.

There is a commercial I'm sure many of you have seen. It is for Dos Equis beer. A comically serious male voice comes on to tell us about a remarkable and remarkably attractive man who possesses all manner of improbable virtues of body and mind: "His blood smells like cologne. The police pull him over just because he so interesting to talk to." And so forth. The voice concludes: "He is The Most Interesting Man in the World." At the end of the commercial the debonair man himself exhorts us to drink Dos Equis with his signature words: "Stay thirsty, my friends." It is good Socratic advice, since to be philosophically erotic is to be always inquisitive, always thirsty for deeper insight, whether it comes from great books or from what Descartes called "the great book of the world."

And so, in conclusion, I say to you graduates what The Most Interesting Man in the World says to us all: Stay thirsty, my friends, thirsty for learning! Congratulations again on your completion of the graduate program. May you continue what you have begun here in all aspects of your lives and remain ever playful in your serious pursuit of the most serious things!