Lessons from an Exemplar of Playfulness: A Critical Response to Trujillo

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Abstract: I evaluate Boomer Trujillo's conception of playfulness as a virtue by assessing its explanatory power in relation to an exemplar of playfulness, Richard Feynman. This mode of evaluation reveals shortcomings in three aspects of Trujillo's characterization of playfulness: his specification of leisure time as the domain of the virtue, his emphasis on the specialist skill that playful people often develop in their preferred play activities, and his conception of sociality as a core characteristic of playful people. Feynman's example demonstrates that playfulness must be domain non-specific, that playful people are generalists, and that the playful disposition is socially transgressive.

Key words: exemplar, Richard Feynman, happiness, play, safe-cracking, virtue

I. A MODEL OF PLAYFULNESS

The physicist Richard Feynman won a Nobel prize in 1965 for his contributions to quantum field theory, particularly in quantum electro-dynamics. He gained even greater fame in the public eye when he was appointed by President Ronald Reagan to the Rogers Commission tasked with investigating the 1986 Space Shuttle Challenger explosion. It was Feynman who accounted for the fault in the famous O-rings that were designed to seal the shuttle's rocket boosters to prevent gas and flame from escaping into adjacent tanks.[1] He was also, in 1941, one among that band of physics and engineering geniuses who descended upon Los Alamos, New Mexico, for the purposes of building an atom bomb and conducting what Oppenheimer named the "Trinity Test," the first test of the bomb.[2]

All of these astounding achievements are sufficient to make a human life very full. But in addition, Feynman was, by virtually every account known, one of the most charismatic and playful figures of modern science. He famously made a game of cracking safes while at Los Alamos, notable because he was *really good at it*. "I love puzzles," he wrote of the experience. "One guy tries to make something to keep another guy out; there must be a way to beat it!" (Feynman and Leighton 1985: 139). For combination locks, which he mastered only a long time after acknowledging that they had him "buffaloed" (at a loss; Feynman 2005: 49), he once utilized what he called a "psychology method" which basically involved profiling his victim: "I said to myself, 'Freddy de Hoffmann is just the kind of guy to use a mathematical constant as a safe combination'" (Feynman and Leighton 1985: 148). Motivated only by playfulness (and boredom),[3] he never stole anything from a safe but left plenty of teasing notes for his victims.

Feynman also picked up the bongos during his Manhattan Project days and proceeded to cultivate skill in playing the drums for the rest of his life. He became proficient enough with the bongo that he was able to play in the orchestra pit for musicals during a visiting professorship period in Brazil. He regularly performed in the talent shows and musicals staged at Caltech. Captivating photos of Feynman at all stages of his life attest to his playfulness.[4] A particularly striking example shows him at the age of 69, just a year before his death, engaged in what looks like dancing with his close friend Ralph Leighton (Feynman 2005: 403). Both are standing, slightly bent forward, with their hands a motion blur in front of them, as if beating their knees in time. Feynman's face is turned directly to the camera, a puckish grin stretching from ear to ear. Learning languages, taking up drawing and painting, mastering the art of the practical joke: Feynman was as much devoted to play as he was to physics, it seems.

Boomer Trujillo has waged a book-length argument in defense of the idea that playfulness is a human virtue, that it is one among the dispositions that a person needs for living her life well. Answering the question that serves as the book's subtitle—*Why Happy People are Playful*—Trujillo casts playfulness as decidedly Aristotelian: "playfulness is a necessary condition for flourishing; happy people are playful people."[5] This strikes me as correct as a general claim, and it does well in predicting the value of playfulness in Feynman's life. His life was good and happy in part because he cultivated and regularly exercised a disposition to be playful.

Curiously, Trujillo does not sketch any exemplar of playfulness in waging his argument. Unlike Aristotle, who posited a "good person" as "a sort of standard and measure of what is noble and pleasant" (2014: 2.4), Trujillo does not consult a model for constructing his account, but instead works piece-wise through features that he intuitively associates with play in order to

arrive at a more comprehensive picture. Reasoning about an exemplar confers advantages, however. Because playfulness is integrated into the happy life in the example of an exemplar, we can take up the task of discerning the mechanisms and causes of the integration rather than building integration piece-wise. I propose to evaluate Feynman's life as exemplary of playfulness and happiness and to assess the predictive and explanatory power of Trujillo's account in relation to that example. The specific account that Trujillo articulates has some strengths but also some serious weaknesses in this exercise. In this critique, I will focus particularly on Trujillo's emphasis on *leisure time* as the domain of playfulness, and on both the *specialism* and the set of "*characteristics of playfulness*" by which Trujillo defines the substance of his focal virtue. As I move through my critique of each of these dimensions of Trujillo's account, I offer my suggestions for revision in light of Feynman's example.

II. LEISURE TIME

First, Trujillo tethers play to leisure. He says that "playfulness helps us use our leisure time to rest, develop ourselves, and engage our communities," and that "playfulness is the virtuous ability to regulate our leisure time" (6, 93). Understanding Trujillo's conception of playfulness requires understanding his conception of "leisure time," then. It is in that domain that we both cultivate and exercise the excellence in question.

So what is leisure time? With admirable philosophical clarity and forthrightness, Trujillo sets out, in his introduction, that "by 'leisure,' I almost always mean leisure time, the time that we have that serves no direct somatic, economic, or otherwise necessary goal; the time that we have to be free and choose what we do for its own sake" (6). What we do in such windows of idleness runs the gamut. Sport, cinema, video games, and weightlifting are all appealed to as

examples in the course of Trujillo's discussion. What is crucial to his account is that the leisure activities are freely chosen and that they are chosen for their own sake rather than in the service of a necessary end. Most pointedly, playfulness is cultivated and exercised when we are "off duty," so to speak. It is a virtue for after-work hours.

In Feynman's life, however, the partition between work and leisure is permeable to the point of being an entirely open border. Work and play are blended (i) spatially, (ii) temporally, and (iii) functionally. The spatial blending is observed in Feynman declining to separate the physical spaces of work from the physical spaces of play. The safes he went about cracking were in the very spaces where he was expected during work hours to attain a high level of professionalism as a physicist working on a new weapon of war. This spatial blending lends itself to the temporal blending through sheer force of habit. Our physical environments trigger our disposition to work or to play (think of how productive you are in your favorite café versus how unproductive you are on your couch), and when those environments are one and the same, our work time will blend with our play time.

The blending of the functions of work and play in Feynman's life is in the merging of *what work is* (or *what work is for*) with *what play is* (or *what play is for*). This merger is evidenced by the difficulty both biographers and Feynman himself, it seems, had in distinguishing his work activities from his play activities. Though his participation in musicals is readily distinguished from his general participation in projects such as the Rogers Commission or quantum theorizing, a close examination of his *modus operandi* as a physicist reveals the playfulness in his very method. Describing how he returned from burnout in his career as a physicist, he explains that he self-consciously reoriented himself to play with the world as he had as a child: "Just like I read the Arabian Nights for pleasure, I'm going to play with physics,

whenever I want to, without worrying about any importance whatsoever" (Feynman and Leighton 1985: 157). He makes this declaration in the course of explaining how he developed an equation for the motion of mass particles by observing and playing with spinning plates (Feynman and Leighton 1985: 157-158). His best work, by his reckoning, was achieved in and through play. His best and most memorable play, too, was informed by his work. There is a complete transfer of activities and skills between the two. What he's doing when he's working is what he's doing when he's playing.

Thus, Feynman's playfulness is not best understood as a disposition to use his leisure time well. Play does not indirectly contribute to his excellence at work by allowing him rejuvenating rest and some personal development. Instead, it directly enhances his excellence at work, is in the substance of what makes him good at his work. If all this is right, then it is a feature of playfulness that Trujillo's account cannot explain because of the presupposition that playfulness is exercised in the domain of leisure time and, therefore, is temporally (and perhaps spatially) and functionally distinct from work.

III. SPECIALISM

Second, Trujillo conceives of the playful person as a specialist. "The playful person perseveres through challenges; she makes efforts to develop special knowledge, training, and skill" (76). I submit that our exemplar's preferred mode of play is quite generalist rather than specialist. That is, his bongo-playing, safe-cracking, art-making, and myriad pranks and practical jokes are all very distinct activities that engage different parts of the body and mind and demand attention to different aspects of other people and to physical space. Though Feynman is remarkably adept at acquiring a masterly degree of skill in some of these activities, it is a mistake

to think that his mastery is critical to his playfulness. Rather, his playfulness is better discerned through observing the *generalism* of his playful activities than through observing his acquisition of specialist skill in any one or few of them.

And why is that? What is it about his generalism that discloses playfulness? It is the disposition to explore and try out new things, the readiness to wonder at puzzles of all varieties and to imagine experiments in all domains, that characterizes Feynman's playfulness. His playfulness is not particularly in the plate-spinning or the O-ring-tinkering, but in the disposition that enabled him to interact with his world in those ways. Indeed, it is the disposition in the playful person that makes any activity or domain potentially playful. The playful person makes play. We ought to find generalism in the play of playful people, then, for they will be seen playing everywhere they go.

Perseverance and the effort to develop specialized skill are incidental to Feynman's playfulness, then. They do not belong in the account of his playfulness, and they even distract from the substance of his playfulness by directing us to think that his excellence in play has to do with specialist outcomes rather than a generalist disposition from the outset. In making skill acquisition and specific, specialist activities focal in his account of playfulness, Trujillo would make the excellence in bongo-playing and safe-cracking the core features of Feynman's playfulness rather than his propensity to make play everywhere he went.

IV. SERIOUSNESS, CREATIVITY, HUMILITY, OPTIMISM, AND SOCIALITY

The third feature of Trujillo's account that needs to be tested is a set of characteristics of playful people that he says "define them as virtuously playful" (75). Setting aside that playfulness itself is supposed to be the virtue—so that the introduction of characteristics that are

fundamental to playfulness seems to indicate that playfulness is not a basic virtue after all—it is clear that what Trujillo aims to achieve with these characteristics is a substantive account of the dispositions that collectively determine a person to engage with their world in the ways requisite for counting as having the virtue of playfulness and for deriving the happiness that is possible through that virtue. The dispositions are: seriousness, creativity, humility, optimism, and sociality (75).

Trujillo's discussion of each of these characteristics is excellent. Following Aristotle, he conceives of each characteristic as a mean between two extremes. Seriousness is the mean between flakiness and obsessiveness (76); creativity is the mean between rigidity and unruliness (77); humility is the mean between fragility and recklessness (77-78); and optimism is the mean between naïveté and dispiritedness (78-79). Sociality is more complex, consisting centrally in being "sensitive to social considerations," which requires a "small scale sense of justice in personal virtue and social interactions" (79-80). This is because playful people, on Trujillo's conception, "help communities become just" (80).

Each of these dimensions of the playful person's profile is discernible in our exemplar. Feynman was serious enough about figuring out how to crack the safes that he persevered to a solution, though without becoming myopically obsessed with the project. He also attests, in recounting his safe-cracking antics, that what motivated him was, in part, the need for increased security of sensitive documents at Los Alamos.[6] Curiosity, humility, and optimism are all discernible in the safe-cracking activities as well. If it is, indeed, a generally applicable disposition (per my argument above) that constitutes Feynman's playfulness, then these five characteristics might just fill out the core of that disposition, so that we can see the expression of these characteristics in every actualization of the playful disposition.

The sociality characteristic gives me pause, however. Though Feynman reports that he would pull materials from safes (and also deposit materials in safes) "[in order] to demonstrate that the locks meant nothing," he says elsewhere that "the key to my interest in all this is probably because I like puzzles so much" (Feynman 2005: 49). That is, Feynman was not motivated to play by the social advantages that his play would bring. It was—and here I concede much to Trujillo—his seriousness, curiosity, humility, and optimism that motivated him. That his play at solving the puzzle of the safes eventuated in greater security was a by-product, not a purpose, of his efforts. The same can be said, in strict terms, of his O-rings discovery and Manhattan Project outputs and even of all the joy he brought to people through his stage performances and his lectures and his poetry and art: he engaged in these activities from a disposition to play around, not from a drive for justice.

If that is unpersuasive—perhaps because we know that our exemplar must have been sensitive to others, if for no other reason than because he clearly loved to make people laugh—consider that Feynman's brand of playfulness is transgressive in its very nature. Like Lewis Carroll, professional logician and author of the immensely playful *Alice in Wonderland*, Feynman makes sport of common conceptions and of norms. That is, he does not abide the expectations that are imposed on him by his profession, his projects, or even by the accepted rules of physics. An amusing and vivid example of this is in his appearance before the congressional committee tasked with investigating the Challenger explosion. His readiness for the meeting consisted in having "pliers in one pocket and a C-clamp in the other" and asking for ice water when he arrived at the conference room, into which he plunged a clamped piece of the O-ring material (rubber) (Feynman and Leighton 1988: 149). "After a few minutes, I'm ready to show the results of my little experiment. I reach for the little button that activates my

microphone" (Feynman and Leighton 1988: 151). But he is stopped. U.S. Air Force General Kutyna chastises him multiple times for his impatience. Even in front of Congress, Feynman was driven—by a playful disposition, I suspect—to pursue his own amusement

Additionally, much of Feynman's play is premised on teasing, pranking, and exploiting others' weakness in the name of a joke. What makes even Feynman's pranks positively playful is that he takes hold of a sort of "serious" aspect of human life (like packing secrets into safes) and he shakes it a little. Like Carroll, he has a curiosity and willingness to experiment with orthodoxies. All of this is, I have said, best described as transgressive, but it does have a dimension of sociability in the fact that the "seriousness" that becomes the object of play is an assumption or tool or widely accepted fixture of life. Playful people are sociable in the sense that they are more attentive to and more engaged with these features.

V. CONCLUSION

Boomer Trujillo's novel suggestion that playfulness is a virtue and is indispensable to the good life is a provocative point of departure from a virtue ethical tradition that has seemed preoccupied with describing virtues as psychological tools for solving the problems of human life.[7] Playfulness does not look like a character trait aimed at problem solving, but rather like a character trait aimed at exploration, experimentation, and invention. The suggestion is compelling and persuasive, and it reveals that some character traits may serve to make us excellent in both the sphere of human action and the sphere of contemplation. Trujillo makes a strong case for the value of playfulness in developing the individual and in making their life go well.

The revisions I have proposed for Trujillo's account (the domain-specificity and the substantive features of playfulness) should be understood as standing downstream of a broad agreement about the virtue ethical value of playfulness. I hope to see further refinements of our understanding of playfulness in the virtue ethics literature and perhaps also further novel suggestions of virtues. Most of all, I hope to see more individuals living playful lives. The more Feynmans, the better.[8]

ENDNOTES

[1] The full account of his involvement in the commission, from the initial phone call invitation, is related by him in Feynman and Leighton (1988: 116–153).

[2] Feynman and Leighton (1985) relate many stories from Feynman's time working on the Manhattan Project, and Feynman describes in a letter to his mother his experience of witnessing the successful detonation (Feynman 2005: 65–68).

[3] "We had no entertainment there in Los Alamos, and we had to amuse ourselves somehow" (Feynman and Leighton 1985: 142).

[4] Feynman (2005) contains not only his correspondence, but many photographs of him with his family, in the classroom, receiving honors, and in various performative modes.

[5] Trujillo (2024: 6). All page references are to this book.

[6] Feynman says, "To demonstrate that the locks meant nothing, whenever I wanted somebody's report and they weren't around, I'd just go in their office, open the filing cabinet, and take it out. When I was finished I would give it back to the guy: 'Thanks for your report'" (Feynman and Leighton [1985: 77]).

[7] This tradition is borne of Aristotle's observation that "the activity of the practical virtues occurs in politics or war, and actions in these spheres seem to involve exertion," and that we engage in politics and war as means, not ends: tools for solving the problems that are impediments to happiness (2014: 10.7).

[8] Many thanks to all who listened to me excitedly report stories about Richard Feynman for several months in preparation of this critique, and especially to boomer, whose own playfulness is an inspiration.

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