

Taking Seriousness Seriously: Defining Seriousness for Everyday Life

Abstract:

There are many things we take seriously but why take something seriously? This paper seeks to layout a clearer understand of what seriousness is by avoiding common mistakes and constructing a definition from three essential components. It uses that definition to illuminate some of the complexities of seriousness, particularly Jean-Paul Sartre's critique of the objectification of subjective possibility found at the end of *Being and Nothingness*. In the end, granting a fuller complex understand of seriousness that can be applied to our everyday life and decisions.

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There are many things we take seriously. Whether it is a student athlete taking the state championship seriously; a politician becoming a serious contender in the race; or the everyday responsibilities of life, like one's job, relationships, community or appearance. It is not just the things in our lives that are serious, but also the decisions we make, from the mundane to the life changing. The breakfast we chose to eat has a serious impact on our day and overall health. The decision to quit one's job and start a company is a serious one that should not be taken lightly.

Considering the overwhelming presence of seriousness in our lives, I am shocked to find we know so little about it. This is not to say that seriousness does not appear in philosophical work, but for some reason it does not come up as a focus of study in itself. I think this is a big mistake. This is because it seems in seriousness is some kind of value judgment. The serious

things are worth pursuing and what is not serious is not. When I chose to take my religious beliefs seriously, it suggests a priority on those religious beliefs. If we are passing this kind of judgment without any understanding of it, we run the risk of mistakenly taking things seriously, which asks the question, why take something seriously? Or to extend the question to hyperbole, why take anything seriously? This question takes a special focus when looking at philosophy. Philosophy has serious implications, for our culture, our understanding of reality and ethical decisions. But is philosophy itself serious? Or are we simply mistaking the seriousness of our jobs for the seriousness of philosophy?

Before we can solve any of these problems a single simpler question takes priority: what is seriousness? The primary obscuring force when it comes to seriousness is the lack of a clear definition from which we can begin to root seriousness out and analyze it. I will seek to show in this paper that seriousness is taking an object as the means towards a further horizon, in which the further horizon is made at-stake in the object.

In order to do this I would like to first examine some of the problems with defining seriousness, both in its ambiguity and relationship to play. With the field set, I would like to clarify the three key elements of seriousness, from which we can construct the definition I have provided. Finally I will seek to use this definition to illuminate some of the complexities of seriousness, particularly Jean-Paul Sartre's critique of the objectification of subjective possibility found at the end of *Being and Nothingness*.

From the outset there are some critical issues which arise when seeking to define seriousness which obfuscates the true meaning of the word. It is not by mere coincidence that we do not have a good working definition of seriousness and these problems have proven

problematic for a number of philosophers. By digging out these problems can we get a firm footing to build a definition of seriousness.

The majority of the work regarding seriousness is framed around play. That is seriousness can be defined as not play, or counter to play. This seems to be a good to place when we start to talk about seriousness. A number of writers outline the interplay of seriousness and play. Nietzsche is a good example. For he often wrote about seriousness in opposition to play. In *The Gay Science*, section 327 titled “Taking Seriously”, Nietzsche writes “The lovely human beast seems to lose its good mood when it thinks well; it becomes 'serious'! And 'where laughter and gaiety are found, thinking is good for nothing' – that is the prejudice of this serious beast against all 'gay science'.” (Nietzsche 182)

But I do not what to define seriousness merely as not play. In the first places it does not truly define the word. There is more to seriousness than it just not being play. This is much the same problem as if we defined hot as not cold. While it does give us some understanding and it illuminates the relationship between the two, it fails to tell us what hot is. From this definition I could not go out and identify hot. The same is true of seriousness. To define it as not play, does not give one the ability to see it, act it and understand what it means to be a serious person. The best they can do is to avoid play. In the second place, I worry seriousness as not play sets up a false dichotomy. It suggests that all action is either serious or play on a spectrum of seriousness. However, seriousness is one attitude or tone among many with which we can approach life. For example there is wonder, the sublime and so on. It is not my intent to enumerate a list here, but rather to show that the dichotomy is premature. Rather than supposing the dichotomy in the

definition, it would be better to define seriousness qua seriousness and should such a definition lead us to a dichotomy, we can adopt it.

The other problem with defining seriousness is the ambiguity in the word. This is a problem that Charles Reid comes across in his essay “On Seriousness”. It is due to this ambiguity in the use of seriousness that leaves Charles Reid’s paper without a satisfactory and coherent understanding of seriousness. This is not merely the result of the casual use of the word serious. There is a clear meaning when we suggest we have a serious dilemma, which imports a risk in the decision. This is a different kind of statement than to say a serious person. When we say someone is a serious person, we do not mean there is a risk in the person. Charles Reid, aptly points out that we have yet another kind of seriousness when we consider serious art verses pop art. (Reid) Finally a number of essays like, “Moral Seriousness” by Keith Ward, identify a distinction in moral seriousness in which one “commitments to transcendent value” (Ward 126), which a serious dilemma like how one ships a valuable package does not.

All of this tells us that seeking a taxonomy of seriousness originating from specific cases will not be fruitful. Nor will simply understand seriousness through an understand and context of play. In short, while it would seem that a located context would illuminate serious, a different approach must be taken.

Considering these challenges, I would like to construct a positive definition of seriousness, one which steps back form context, to look behind the act itself. If we are to have any handle on the role of seriousness in philosophy, or any discipline for that matter, we will have to say what seriousness is. To ascribe it positive qualities which are identifiable in action, discourse or a discipline. Secondly to find a definition which works for all cases and types. In

order to do this I would like to examine three essential components which can be identified in all cases of serious: the horizon of possibility, the by way of an object and the making “at-stake.” Only then can we understand that seriousness is taking an object as the means towards a further horizon, in which the further horizon is made at-stake in the object.

In all seriousness there must be a horizon. Jeff Malpas provides a clear definition of this word horizon when he writes “In phenomenology, the ‘horizon’ is, in general terms, that larger context of meaning in which any particular meaningful presentation is situated.” (Malpas) In order for things to show up as meaningful a context or field must exist in which it is meaningful. However, a horizon is something that is not present, but a potential situation for meaning. For example a young girl sees a horizon of possibilities when she looks to her future and sees in the distance a vision of herself as a basketball star. In all forms of seriousness there is always a horizon present. That is seriousness is always directed towards some potential situation. The serious contender in a political race is aimed toward the horizon of the office, with all of its duties and responsibilities. In the serious dilemma of how to invest my money there is a horizon of a financially stable life and all the luxuries that come with it. Finally, in a serious life, there is the horizon of a life well lived.

The next essential component is the by way of an object. The object is that thing through which the horizon is accessed. This can be a physical object, an event, an experience or a goal. What is essential is that in seriousness the horizon is not approached directly but rather indirectly through the object. Thus, the object is setup like a key or doorway through which the horizon is accessed. This is why we say the SAT is a serious test, because it is through the SAT that the horizon of attending a particular college is opened up. The object is also essential because it

makes the horizon obtainable. If one is to become a basketball star all the practice makes that obtainable and this is in part why those who what to success take practice seriously.

The final and most essential thing is an “at-stake.” There is a risk in taking something seriously. Reid rightly points out “Semantically, 'serious' is a word pointing to some threat or challenge, X, implicit or explicit, to a value, Y.” (Reid 232) To take a game of chess seriously one must risk that they can fail and that they might be a bad chess player. This is why one can play a game and yet it can be serious, while for your opponent is it not serious, because they are not risking anything. What one risks is the horizon. In this way the horizon is made at-stake. That is by failing one can no longer access the horizon and possibilities that come with it. When I make the serious choice of how to invest my money, I am aware that I might not end up wealthy. When one recognizes the serious nature of life, they see that one can waste it.

Now that we have a clearer understand of the three essential components, we can construction the definition of seriousness as taking an object as the means towards a further horizon, in which the further horizon is made at-stake in the object. This definition captures the interconnection between the horizon and the object. Showing us that we take things seriously precisely because we want to obtain some horizon and see that we can do that but putting it at-stake in an object.

Now that the definitions of seriousness has been laid out, I would like to consider two key points from Jean-Paul Sartre. Both come from an often over looked passage from *Being and Nothingness* which appears at the end of the text in the conclusion, in which Sartre warns “But the principal result of existential psychoanalysis must be to make us repudiate the *spirit of*

seriousness.” (Sartre 796) In the follow paragraph he layout two points which he warns about seriousness.

The first is that when we take things seriously, we can mistake our seriousness for something independent of us, that is because the object appears to be the problem and solution, embodying the horizon, so the quality of seriousness appears objective. Sartre writes “it considers values as transcendent givens independent of human subjectivity” (Sartre 796) That is, we mistake the seriousness as exterior to our own condition. When climbing a mountain I may come across a large rock which I need to get around. The rock is an obstacle to my ascent. However, the rock is not in itself an obstacle, it only became an obstacle upon my encountering it. But without my serious task of climbing the mountain, the rock is just a rock and blocks nothing.

Secondly seriousness objectifies the horizon, by reducing it to the object. When taking something seriously the object qua object becomes the only concern. If one seeks to be a basketball star, it is the championship game which becomes the only concern. Yet, at the same time the object matters only as an object for getting to the horizon. Sartre writes, “it transfers the quality of “desirable” from the ontological structure of things to their simple material constitution.” (Sartre 796) That is transferring the value the object holds itself to being simply a object for something. For example, if one takes their health seriously, a meal is no longer meaningful except as an object for health.

From these two points a further point and be drawn. Seriousness imparts ethical imperative. When we look at seriousness as a separate objective fact which we are directed towards by the horizon, it seems as if there is an obligation to unlock the horizon and an

obligation to do it in the correct way so as not to lose the horizon. This comes from the seeming transcendent value, bestowed on the object from the horizon. When one takes a job seriously, the obligation colors our experience in a moral light, showing us coworkers who are not merely lazy, but immoral in their disregard for the importance of the work. But Sartre issues this warning, “Thus we are already on the moral plane but concurrently on that of bad faith, for it is an ethics which is ashamed of itself and does not dare speak its name.” (Sartre 796) Sartre’s concern is that in this ethical domain it is not recognized as ethical, rather it is taken as empirical, as fact. If you were to ask the basketball player they will not say there is an ethical valuation occurring when they take the state championship seriously. This takes a sharper edge when we consider the seriousness with which racial genocide occurs. It is not seen as an ethical question, but rather an objective necessity for obtaining a goal.

Finally, even though, I have been dismissive of the dichotomy of seriousness and play, I would like to address one meaningful observation from Nietzsche’s analysis of seriousness which does bring to light the weight of seriousness. This weight is a direct result of the ethical imperative of seriousness and can be seen clearly in Nietzsche’s *The Gay Science* in section 341 – The heaviest weight, when after laying out the recurrence of the demon, he writes “Would you not throw yourself down and gnash your teeth and curse the demon who spoke thus? ” (Nietzsche 194) This passage is often cited when looking for an ethical imperative in Nietzsche and this is because when presenting the seriousness of the choice we can see the weight of the choices we make. When making decisions about finances these decisions weight on us, precisely because we take them seriously, because we can see that the horizon of our possibilities is made at-stake.

By first examine some of the problems with defining seriousness, both in its ambiguity and relationship to play, we have see how not to approach understand seriousness. In clarifying the definition of seriousness, by way of horizons, objects and the at-stake, we came to a clearer, deeper and more functional understanding of seriousness. Using this definition I illuminated some of the complexities of seriousness, particularly Jean-Paul Sartre's critique of the objectification of subjective possibility found at the end of *Being and Nothingness*. From all this, it should be clear that seriousness is taking an object as the means towards a further horizon, in which the further horizon is made at-stake in the object. Now that we understand this definition, hopefully when asked the question why take something seriously, we can more accurately reflect. When we find ourselves demanding that something get fixed or when barring the weight of big decisions, we can step back and ask should we take this so seriously in order to help us open up the our greatest horizons? And in understanding how to take life seriously, one can hope to live a life well lived.

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