

# Getting Serious about Seriousness: On the Meaning of *Spoudaios* in Aristotle's Ethics

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**Abstract:** In the following paper I discuss the under-appreciated role that the concept of the morally serious (*spoudaios*) person plays in Aristotle's moral philosophy. I argue that the conventional English rendering of *spoudaios* as "good" has a tendency to cut us off from important nuances in Aristotle's consideration of the virtuous person. After discussing aspects of his use of the concept in the *Nicomachean Ethics* and the *Politics* I dismiss a misunderstanding of seriousness as a kind of morally indifferent personality trait. I close by briefly reflecting on how an absence of moral seriousness characterizes much contemporary moral theorizing and produces what Anscombe described as the "corrupt mind."

The role of moral seriousness in Aristotle's moral philosophy has received less attention than it deserves.<sup>1</sup> A large part of the problem lies in the tendency of critics (and translators) of the *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Politics* simply to subsume (moral) seriousness under the more general notion of the good. The first appearance of the word *spoudaios*<sup>2</sup> in the *Nicomachean Ethics* is in the central argument of the entire work at Chapter 7 of Book I, the so-called function or work argument. There he famously claims:

And if the work of a human being is a being-at-work of the soul in accordance with reason, or not without reason, while we say that the work of a certain sort of person is the same in kind as that of a *serious* [*spoudaios*] person of that sort, as in the case of a harpist and of a *serious* harpist, and this is simply because in all cases the superiority in excellence is attached to the work, since the work of a harpist is to play the harp and the work of a *serious* harpist is to play the harp well—if this is so and we set down that the work of a human being is a certain sort of life, while this life consists of a being-at-work of the soul and actions that go along with reason, and it belongs to a man of *serious* stature to do these things well and beautifully. (emphasis added, 1098a8–15, trans. Joe Sachs)

I suspect that this version of the famous passage will strike some as strange, since by far the most common practice in English translation is to render *spoudaios* with *good* (Crisp, Irwin, Ross, Rackham). In the quoted passage above, Joe Sachs has used perhaps the closest English equivalent—*serious*—in an attempt to remain closer to Aristotle's original.<sup>3</sup>

This is significant because, as Francis Sparshott notes, Aristotle could easily have chosen to use the more straightforward Greek term for good—“*agathos*, [a] colourless word,” but instead chose “a loaded word, *spoudaios*” (Sparshott 1994, 50). It seems likely that Aristotle does this precisely “to exploit the ambiguities” (*ibid.*, 442) of the term *spoudaios*.

Obviously, we should point out that the standard choice of the English *good* is not formally incorrect; rather, it is merely incomplete and deceptively colorless. As such there is a danger of failing to appreciate the nuances and connotations that Aristotle is playing with here in using *spoudaios*. In short, I think that we can better appreciate the hidden subtlety of Aristotle's perhaps by now overly familiar views by thinking through the nuances that properly belong to this term.

As we begin to think about the significance of Aristotle's word choice, Sparshott suggests we make note of four antonyms of *spoudaios*:

[*Spoudaios*] can mean “solemn” as opposed to “playful”—but this is plainly irrelevant at this point. It can mean “serious” as opposed to “frivolous” or “negligent.” But it can also (see LSJ) mean “good at” one's task as opposed to “bad at” it (*phaulos*), and (morally) “respectable” or “worthy” as opposed to “rascally” or “worthless” (*ponēros*). (Sparshott 1994, 51)

Indeed if we go to the Liddell-Scott-Jones dictionary we find as well an emphasis on activity, energy, earnestness, zealousness (from the root, *spoudē* = haste, zeal). In short, the overwhelming sense we get is that to be *spoudaios* is to take (serious) matters seriously; to give them their proper (condign) weight; to attend to them in appropriate ways.

If we work through the analogy to the “serious harpist” with this in mind we should notice that there are at least some senses in which one could be a *good* musician without being a *serious* one. If, for instance, we were to think of musicianship as primarily a matter of technical proficiency, we can certainly imagine individuals who possess a great deal of skill or fluency in playing an instrument that nonetheless do not take it seriously. A musical savant might find himself possessed of amazing natural talents, but be uninterested in developing or exercising them. Conversely, it is similarly easy to imagine someone who takes music very seriously and yet is tone-deaf and musically inept.

In other words, being serious about something is not straightforwardly the same thing as be good at it. As Charles Reid notes in his analysis of seriousness:

“Taking X seriously” is having an attitude towards it . . . “Jones takes music seriously,” ascribes to him a disposition to choose, and use, whatever means he deems appropriate to the promotion of what he thinks is good

music. . . . Semantically, “serious” is a word pointing to some threat or challenge, X, implicit or explicit, to a value, Y. (Reid 1967, 231–232)

So to take X seriously is to adopt a higher-order reflective stance towards X that considers X under the purview of some kind of value (or disvalue). I think this higher-order reflectivity is an important part of what Aristotle wants us to take out of the claim that the work of a human being is the same as the work of a serious human being. Indeed what makes a *serious* human being serious is his capacity and willingness to subject his practical reasoning to such higher order reflection.

I also strongly suspect that Aristotle mindfully chose a kind of artistry (cithara playing) as his analogy. We recognize in the serious artist a kind of thoughtfulness and consideration in the exercise of his artistic choices. This does not mean, of course, that we will always be convinced by his choices or agree with them. However, we can recognize that there is a legitimate space for disagreement in the balancing of different, but real values. So, for instance, I might think that a certain tempo and use of *rubato* best serves a specific piece of music and yet well understand how a different interpreter might choose differently. What ultimately matters—within limits, of course—is that his choices suggest a kind of deep thoughtfulness borne of sustained and committed reflection on the values in play.

Indeed, the well-lived human life is itself almost a kind of artistic performance, though one whose ultimate ends are determined not by a playwright but the intrinsic capacities of human nature. To take one's life seriously is to shape one's actions and character thoughtfully and carefully in light of the subtle interplay of contingent particular circumstance and the essential features of human flourishing. The failure to do this is precisely characteristic of someone who is low, base (*phaulos*) or bad, evil (*ponēros*).

We can get a sense of this defect precisely by considering what Aristotle says in Book I, Chapter 3 after his famous remark that we can only seek the level of precision in ethics appropriate to its nature. Remarking on the “good judge,” he notes:

good judgment goes along with the way each one is educated. . . . For this reason, it is not appropriate for a young person to be a student of politics, since the young are inexperienced in the actions of life. . . . Also, since the young are apt to follow their impulses, they would hear such discourses without purpose or benefit. . . . And it makes no difference whether one is young in age or immature in character, for the deficiency doesn't come from time, but from living in accord with feeling and following every impulse. (1095a1–5)

So the problem with the immature (in age or in character) is precisely that they are not sufficiently reflective about their lives, but live in accord with feeling and follow their impulses. They are lacking in “education,” which here does not mean a body of knowledge, but an ordering of the soul.<sup>4</sup>

Not coincidentally, this very point is illustrated in Book VII of the *Politics*, where the concept of seriousness makes another appearance.

A city-state is *excellent* (*spoudaia*), however, because the citizens who participate in the constitution are *excellent* (*spoudaios*); and in our city-state all the citizens participate in the constitution. The matter we have to investigate, therefore, is how a man becomes *excellent* (*spoudaios*). (*Politics* VII, 1332a32–35)

We have already determined the sorts of natures people should have if it is to be easy for the legislator to take them in hand. Everything thereafter is a task for education. For some things are learned by habituation, others by instruction. (*Politics* VII, 1332b9–10)<sup>5</sup>

We see here that not only should an individual person be *spoudaios*, but indeed the good political community should be as well. Furthermore, the serious man and the serious city are deeply interrelated. Not only is the *polis* serious in being constituted by serious men, but citizens only become serious through the right kind of “education” (i.e., the sort they can only receive in the *spoudaios* city).

Combined with similar passages from the *Ethics*,<sup>6</sup> we can come to understand Aristotle’s point about the morally serious person more generally. Real pursuit of the good is only possible once we are able to give ourselves over to serious reflection, especially concerning the virtues, and are not driven by our passions. However, this is only possible though the right kind of education—or, better, *soul-craft*—in which (ideally, at least) good laws help to form the young into virtuous citizens. In the absence of such a formation, however, the pursuit of the good borders on the futile, precisely because such a person will simply not be able to take matters seriously in the right way.

Aristotle expands on this in Book III of the *Ethics* when he writes:

to the person of serious moral stature (*spoudaiō*), what is wished for would be what is truly good, but to the flighty sort of person (*phaulō*) it would be any random thing. . . . For the person of serious moral stature discerns each thing correctly, and in each kind of thing, the true instance shows itself to such a person. For in accordance with each sort of active condition there are special things that are beautiful and pleasant, and the person of serious moral stature is distinguished most of all, perhaps, for seeing what is truly so in each kind, since such a person is like a rule and measure of what is beautiful and pleasant. In most people, a distortion seems to come about by the action of pleasure, since it appears good when it is not. So people choose the pleasant as good, and avoid the painful as bad. (1113a27–35)

To discern the real nature of things as authentically beautiful or pleasant it is necessary to be a “person of serious moral stature.” This actually allows us to see more deeply into the problem of the immature in character. When they are driven by feeling it is not just that they tend to be unreflective and impulsive, but that their untutored feelings simply do not line up with what is authentically pleasant and

good. In other words, because they lack moral seriousness they do not perceive the authentically good as pleasurable or the authentically bad as painful. Instead, they are driven to pursue what *seems* to them good and pleasurable, but which, owing to their lack of seriousness, likely is not.<sup>7</sup>

Accordingly, seriousness is central to virtue. At some level Paula Reiner understands this citing the above passage to argue that the *spoudaios* man “can be pictured as a sort of caryatid, supporting, with the help of ‘right reason’ the weight of the *Eudemian* and *Nicomachean Ethics*. If the ‘seriously good man’ were to fall, much of the *Ethics* would fall with him” (Reiner 1991, 75). She goes on to argue that Aristotle’s emphasis on seriousness reflects his “bias away from humor and toward seriousness, which in fact results from a personality trait of his [own]” (*ibid.*, 77). She seems to think that Aristotle’s insistence on seriousness is just a matter of his personal preferences away from humor.<sup>8</sup>

She imagines the relevant sense of seriousness to be what she calls a morally indifferent “personality trait”—i.e., a kind of humorlessness (or, perhaps better, stick-in-the-mudness).<sup>9</sup> Precisely because she thinks that seriousness is a mere personality trait and not a morally significant “character trait,” she thinks that Aristotle’s arguments that depends on the concept of seriousness are vulnerable. Indeed she goes so far as to suggest that “much of the *Ethics* would fall” were this fact recognized. Of course, her fundamental mistake is in thinking that Aristotle’s favoring of seriousness is just a morally insignificant expression of his personal humorlessness.

Whatever his personal preferences against riotousness and buffoonery (which do seem to be real),<sup>10</sup> his treatment of the *spoudaios* man and the *spoudaios* polis show that he cannot have in mind a mere “personality trait.”<sup>11</sup> Rather it is precisely because one can only become serious through the right kind of education that we can recognize that what is at stake here is the shaping of a character or soul. Aristotle’s favoring of seriousness is not a personal preference, but a carefully considered description of the character the mature citizen of a good and serious polis should have.

Accordingly, seriousness cannot be a mere personality trait or personal quirk. Rather it is a fundamental part of possessing a virtuous character, especially, as we saw above, in that it is importantly truth-tracking with regards to what is and is not authentically pleasant. In other words, not only will someone lacking in seriousness not be able to manifest the virtues, but that person will likely be driven to pursue ends that are contrary to the authentic fulfillment of human nature. This, of course, is not to suggest that seriousness is a distinct state one must achieve before pursuing virtue, but rather that the virtuous person is by nature serious, as seriousness is (like all the virtues) co-instantiated with courage, temperance, justice, etc.

Rosalind Hursthouse has a discussion in her famous paper “Virtue Theory and Abortion” which helps to explain this point, in particular the way that moral seriousness is necessary for truly prudential (*phronetic*) judgment. Although she incorrectly thinks that deliberate abortion can sometimes be the “right” choice, she nonetheless illustrates a key point about much of the pro-abortion mindset when she writes:

The fact that the premature termination of a pregnancy is, in some sense, the cutting off of a new human life, and thereby, like the procreation of a new human life, connects with all our thoughts about human life and death, parenthood, and family relationships, must make it a *serious* matter. To disregard this fact about it, to think of abortion as nothing but the killing of something that does not matter, or as nothing but the exercise of some right or rights one has, or as the incidental means to some desirable state of affairs, is to do something callous and light-minded, the sort of thing that no virtuous and wise person would do. It is to have the wrong attitude not only to fetuses, but more generally to human life and death, parenthood, and family relationships. (Hursthouse 1991, 237–238, emphasis added)

What she is criticizing as “callous and light-minded” is what Aristotle calls *phaulos*. She is really saying that simply because abortion kills a human being, it is by its very nature a serious and weighty matter. As such it always merits being taken seriously, and the failure either to recognize that seriousness or to judge and act appropriately in light of that fact is inconsistent with virtue.<sup>12</sup>

While her point is well taken about abortion in particular, her observation about the moral defectiveness (i.e., viciousness) of callousness and light-mindedness is no way specific to it and generalizes broadly. I think this actually reflects an especially prevalent problem in contemporary moral philosophy that can be seen in G. E. M. Anscombe’s famous paper “Modern Moral Philosophy.” There she somewhat shockingly—if refreshingly—declares, “if someone really thinks, *in advance*, that it is open to question whether such an action as procuring the judicial execution of the innocent should be quite excluded from consideration—I *do not want to argue with him; he shows a corrupt mind*” (Anscombe 1958, 17, emphasis added).

Kevin Flannery argues that Anscombe “clearly has in mind here the Aristotelian distinction between the *akrataēs* (the ‘weak willed’ man who is tempted to, and sometimes does, act contrary to correct moral principles but later regrets it) and the *akolastos* (the ‘depraved’ man who acts contrary to correct moral principles but does not regret it)” (Flannery 2008, 151).<sup>13</sup> As he goes on to explain, unlike the normal person who sometimes is simply weak-willed and falls victim to temptation, the *akolastos* man is one that embraces evil through what he calls a “deliberate adhering” (*prohairesis*). In other words, the “depraved” man deliberately clings to an evil end, not out of temporary weakness, but conviction.

Flannery quotes Aristotle’s description of the *akolastos* as one who believes “that he always ought to pursue a pleasant thing that is at hand” (*NE*, 1146b23, trans. Sachs) and goes on to note that “the defining characteristic of Aristotle’s *akolastos* is his determination to follow his desires, whether the acts they cause him to perform can be brought into a consistent whole—a consistent life—or not” (159). So we can see that what truly characterizes the *akolastos* is a fundamental mistake about *pleasure*, and in particular whether he ought to pursue what *seems* to him pleasant at the moment. As we saw above, this is just what is going on with someone who

is not *spoudaios*, because the unserious person mistakes what seems pleasant with what is truly or authentically pleasant (where the latter is a consequence of what is authentically fulfilling for a human being according to nature).

What makes the *akolastos* “depraved” or “corrupt” is precisely the way in which he has embraced or “adheres to” his moral unseriousness. As we saw above, for Aristotle the development of moral seriousness is possible only in the context of a (minimally) just community. What I want to suggest here is that just such a “corruption” is prevalent among contemporary moral philosophers, most obviously in the intellectual descendants of the consequentialists Anscombe labeled and skewered in that famous essay. And, of course, it is no accident that consequentialists are loathe to make the right kinds of distinctions among pleasures, including and especially the distinction at the heart of Aristotle’s concept of the morally serious person as the one who feels pleasure in the right sort of way with respect to the right sort of objects (i.e., those that are authentically fulfilling of human nature).

Even to run down the litany of proposals at the heart of the contemporary consequentialist project—perhaps most obviously in bioethics, but not limited to that sphere—is to be struck by the aptness of Anscombe’s cutting remark. It really is a depraved mind that can embrace infanticide as well as abortion, the killing of the old and infirm in pursuit of “quality of life,” and the wholesale reduction of justice to an obscene maximization principle, whether of simple pleasures, preference satisfaction, or whatever other putatively optimal outcome is asserted.<sup>14</sup>

It is our misfortune that unlike Anscombe we might be forced to argue with them, at least in the public sphere, but the deeper point is that in some sense there is nothing to argue *about* with such people. Because, of course, real argument presupposes a certain level of agreement on fundamental grounds. What I hope is that this sort of analysis makes it apparent that moral seriousness (within a morally serious political community) is necessary for the genuine pursuit of the good. Ultimately, this is why giving real consideration to the role that moral seriousness plays in Aristotle’s moral thought is important not only for a better exegetical understanding of his particular ethical theory, but also—if the virtues approach to ethics is broadly correct—for moral philosophy more generally.<sup>15</sup>

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## Notes

1. While Francis Sparshott has dedicated his book-length study *Taking Life Seriously* to the matter (Sparshott 1994), there seems to be relatively little discussion of moral seriousness in the secondary literature on Aristotle; see, for instance Reid 1967; Reiner 1991; Joe Sachs’s notes (esp. 11n16) in his translation of the *Ethics* (Aristotle, Sachs 2002), and, obliquely, Flannery 2008.

2. Various forms of *spoudaios* occur more than forty times in the *Ethics*.

3. I find it interesting that the Medieval Latin translations (e.g., William Moerbeke) tend to use *studiosus* to translate *spoudaios*, which as in many cases (e.g., *habitus* for *hexis*) tends to be closer to the Greek than the corresponding English translation (e.g., *habit*). My thanks to Anthony Crifasi for this point.

4. This also allows us to recognize that one does not become morally serious primarily through intellectual prowess. Aristotle himself points out that virtue comes not through study and so even people lacking in intellectual formation can achieve a kind of moral seriousness and practical wisdom through long experience and sensitivity to the contours of human life. I suspect a figure like St. John Vianney meets this description.

5. This translation is by C. D. C. Reeve, who also prefers “excellent” in the *Ethics*. Interestingly, Joe Sachs also renders the various forms of *spoudaios* in this *Politics* VII passage with “excellent” despite his insistence on using “serious” in the *Ethics*; see Aristotle, Sachs 2012, 227.

6. For example: “one who is going to listen adequately to discourse about things that are beautiful and just, and generally about things that pertain to political matters, needs to have been beautifully brought up by means of habit” (1095b5ff.), and numerous passages in Book X (see n7).

7. He makes the point explicitly in Book X: “in general, feeling seems to yield not to reasoned speech but to force. So it is necessary for a character to be present in advance that is in some way appropriate for virtue, loving what is beautiful and scorning what is shameful. But it is difficult to hit upon a right training toward virtue from youth when one has not been brought up under laws of that sort, for living temperately and with endurance is not pleasant to most people, and especially not to the young” (1179b28ff.).

8. “I do not know a Greek equivalent for *de gustibus non disputandum est* (or for our modern equivalent ‘different strokes for different folks’). In the areas of character, tragedy, philosophy, and physique (sculpture), the Greeks brought forth norms that have called forth universal acclaim. Perhaps, had they focused on personality, they could have done the same” (Reiner 1991, 78).

9. She opposes “personality traits” to “character traits.” She seems to think that personality traits, unlike character traits, are basically morally indifferent. Because she thinks that seriousness is a mere personality trait borne of Aristotelian personal preferences she suggests that “much of the *Ethics* would fall” were this fact recognized. Of course I think her fundamental error is in thinking that Aristotle’s favoring of seriousness is just an expression of his personal humorlessness.

10. Reiner does offer some interesting observations on these matters. See 77–78.

11. For instance, a *polis* could not be *spoudaios*, if seriousness were just a matter of personality.

12. Her mistake in favoring the permissibility of abortion is, ironically, an expression of her own failure to take the matter sufficiently seriously. See my discussion of Hursthouse in “Virtue Ethics and Abortion” (Lu 2011, 106–113).

13. Sachs renders *akolastos* with “dissipated.”

14. To be clear, when I claim that the consequentialists are depraved and unserious in their reflections on ethical questions, I obviously do not mean that they do not give considerable time and attention to the questions they discuss. Rather, following Anscombe, I mean that in virtue of their consequentialism (with its attendant openness to the possibility that

any kind of action might serve the utility calculus and therefore the impossibility of any true absolute prohibitions) they simply lack the framework necessary for serious moral reflection.

15. I owe a great deal of thanks to my good friend John Kress who first made me aware of Aristotle's use of *spoudaios* and its importance in his thought. My reflections on moral seriousness more broadly have been most shaped by discussions with him as well as Rachel Lu. I also thank Steven Baldner for his helpful comments on the paper delivered at the Fall Meeting.

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