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1. What is the Philosophy of Sport?

A cursory glance at the daily sports news highlights perennial philosophical and ethical issues in sport: drug taking, cheating, corruption, discrimination and violence, amongst many others. Indeed, the hot topics on the day of writing include: a criminal investigation into corruption within a high profile sport Governing body, concern over the effects of concussion in contact sport, a judicial challenge on whether a card game should be classified as a sport, officials banned for match fixing, further discussion about the introduction of goal-line technology, and ongoing lamentation by politicians on the low profile of women's sport. We are confronted with philosophical and ethical issues in sport on a daily basis and they regularly form heated arguments between aficionados everywhere. Sport is a large part of modern life. The issues that sport raises are even larger. And nearly everyone has an opinion.

Many of those interested in these types of issues and discussions have not been explicitly introduced to philosophic methods or to the philosophy of sport as a distinct academic subject. Yet when these debates occur in the pub, on the terraces or in the media, those involved are engaging in a philosophical discussion about the meaning and value of sport and the concepts related to it.

This chapter aims to provide an overview to the uninitiated as to the development and history of the philosophy of sport, the types of questions raised, and the methods used to answer them. It will demonstrate that what many people do naturally when they discuss sporting issues is essentially philosophy; but it will also highlight where and how philosophy is done badly and how philosophical arguments and skills can be improved.

How did the philosophy of sport originate?

The philosophy of sport as an academic subject is a fairly recent notion. Although a few famous philosophers have mentioned sport in their writings (Plato, who was also an Olympic wrestler, is a primary example), it was only in the late 1960s and early 1970s when sport as a distinct subject worthy of philosophical investigation started to be taken seriously. The earliest publications in the area concentrated on the issue of play

rather than sport, as given in Johan Huizinga's¹ *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture* and Roger Callois's² *Man, Play and Games*. It wasn't until the late 1960s that academic interest in the philosophy of sport began to gain momentum, and this was primarily in North America. Howard Slusher's³ *Man, Sport and Existence: A Critical Analysis*, and Paul Weiss⁴ *Sport: A Philosophic Inquiry*, were the first to focus on the nature of sport and its relation to human life, whilst Eleanor Metheny wrote two books that considered aesthetic dimensions of sport and movement⁵. There was also a growing interest in the philosophy of physical education and sports pedagogy with publications such as Davis and Miller's⁶ *The Philosophic Process in Physical Education*, Webster's⁷ *The Philosophy of Physical Education* and Zeigler's⁸ *The Philosophic Process in Physical Education*. Scott Kretchmar⁹ has since argued that many of the early publications in the philosophy of physical education and pedagogy provided little, if any, real philosophical insight into sport and were more concerned with using physical education and sport as a vehicle for teaching the established moral values of educational institutions. Such a focus arguably reduced the credibility of the philosophy of sport in more traditional philosophical circles and led to it being marginalised and isolated for much of the 1970s and 1980s.

Despite this slow start, interest in the subject has since grown considerably and has attracted commentary and publications from philosophers outside the traditional sports pedagogy and physical education backgrounds. This can be seen in the extensive bibliographic resources that are now available, the creation of many national and international associations, and two journals whose sole remit is the philosophy of sport. The area's broadening appeal and respectability in wider philosophic circles is also increasingly apparent. There are now dedicated sessions to the philosophy of

¹ Huizinga, J. (1949) *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

² Caillouis, R. (1961) *Man, Play and Games* (trans. Meyer Barash). New York: Free Press of Glencoe.

³ Slusher, H.S. (1967) *Man, Sport and Existence: A Critical Analysis*. Philadelphia: Lea & Febiger.

⁴ Weiss, P. (1969) *Sport. A Philosophic Inquiry*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.

⁵ Metheny, E. (1965) *Connotations of Movement in Sport and Dance*. Dubuque, IA: W.C. Brown. and Metheny, E. (1968) *Movement and Meaning*. New York: McGraw Hill.

⁶ Davis, E.C. and Miller, D.M. (1961) *The Philosophic Process in Physical Education* (2nd edition). Dubuque, IA: W.C. Brown.

⁷ Webster, R.W. (1965) *Philosophy of Physical Education*. Dubuque, IA: W.C. Brown.

⁸ Zeigler, E.F. (1968) *Problems in the History and Philosophy of Physical Education and Sport*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

⁹ Kretchmar, R.S. (1997) *Philosophy of Sport*. In J.D. Messengale and R.A. Swanson (Eds.) *The History of Exercise and Sports Science*. Leeds: Human Kinetics.

sport in the American Philosophical Association conferences, and in 2012, the Royal Institute of Philosophy (established by Bertrand Russell in 1925), held a series of public lectures and published a collection of essays on the subject.

What kinds of philosophical questions are found in sport?

In traditional philosophical circles the study of sport has been largely overlooked or dismissed as uninteresting and unworthy of investigation. Even some scholars who have produced considerable work in the field, such as Graham McFee¹⁰, have argued that apart from a few specific ethical issues, there isn't really such a thing called 'the philosophy of sport'. Similarly, David Best criticised the academic study of sports by claiming, "the very notion of a *subject* of sport makes no sense."¹¹ In some ways, Best was right: one cannot study sport as such; rather students of sport study a set of aspects or disciplines that relate to sport in some way, such as biomechanics, physiology, psychology, sociology, history or pedagogy. Students apply disciplinary theory to sport specific examples; so one might learn about the workings of the heart and circulatory system, memory function, the way in which sport was used as a tool in facilitating the expansion of the British Empire, or effective teaching strategies. Sport is simply used as the peg on which to hang knowledge or ideas about other subject areas. This is arguably the case for the philosophy of sport too. Students taking philosophy courses in sports programmes might learn about particular ethical theories, major philosophical figures, or key debates that form the core curriculum of traditional philosophy departments. But (and this is a direct counter to McFee's claim) they will also study philosophical issues that have a special and particular application to sport, or are questions about which sport is able to provide a greater clarity. These therefore might be questions about the nature of sport and its relation to the concepts of play, games and leisure. It might be about the way in which sport provides us with our understanding of abstract ethical concepts such as fairness and respect; as can be seen our use of popular sporting metaphors such as, 'level playing-field', 'it's just not cricket' and 'pulling together'. It might be about the value that sport has on the human life or what part it plays in a good life. There are also ethical issues that seem to be unique to sport, such as doping, fair play and gamesmanship. And sport might also

¹⁰ McFee, G. (1998) Are There Philosophical Issues with Respect to Sport (Other than Ethical Ones)? In M. J. McNamee & S. J. Parry (Eds.), *Ethics and Sport*. London: Taylor and Francis.

¹¹ Best, D. (1978) *Philosophy and Human Movement*. London: George Allen and Unwin. p122.

help us come to new understandings and perspectives about concepts such as 'equality' and 'fairness' in relation to issues such as sex, sexuality, race and disability. These types of issues suggest, therefore, that sport is a worthy topic for philosophical investigation and that McFee's and Best's scepticism is wrong.

What is philosophy?

In order to understand the philosophy of sport, some knowledge is needed as to what it is to study philosophy. In the same way that to study sports physiology, sports biomechanics or sports psychology requires knowledge about physiology, biomechanics or psychology, studying the philosophy of sport requires knowledge about the content and methods of philosophy. Obviously there is little space available here to provide a detailed account of the history of philosophy and philosophical methods but what I will try to do is provide a general indication of the subject and methods.

Philosophy provides the foundation for all other subject disciplines. Prior to the period of the Enlightenment in the 17th to 19th centuries, the separate subject areas that we distinguish today did not exist. Those that were fortunate enough to be educated or had free time to study the world were few in number and were not able to depend upon the wealth of scientific and empirical knowledge that enables scholars and academics to specialise (in ever increasing ways) today. Anyone who was interested in issues that now fall under the umbrella of 'science' was simply called a 'natural philosopher'. Additionally, the power of the church and organised religion meant that free, open and critical investigation was stifled or even punished. As such, sound scientific processes and research were non-existent, and knowledge about the world was often dictated by those in authority and religious doctrine. Those who challenged received opinion were generally labelled as heretics, witches and alchemists.

Despite this, there have been times of great philosophic thought which have provided rigorous and critical insight into the world and our life within it. The most notable records of this have come from Mediterranean Europe, particularly Ancient Greece around 6 BCE, and provide us with the familiar names of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, amongst others.

These philosophers asked questions about the nature of the world, our place within it and how to live a 'good' life. Philosophers aim to try to understand the workings of

world and our place within it. They ask difficult questions that others often take for granted. Fundamental philosophical questions are therefore often framed as; 'What things exist in the world?', 'How do we know they exist?', 'How should I live?' and 'How should I treat others?' Philosophical questions are questions about reality, knowledge, truth, value, meaning and ethics, and lie at the heart of all other disciplines. This is why reaching a deep understanding of other disciplines requires grappling with difficult philosophical questions as well. Therefore any serious study of sport requires engagement with philosophical questions such as; 'What is the value of sport?' 'How do we ensure sporting competition is fair?' 'What does good sport look like?' and 'Is sporting knowledge different to other types of knowledge?'

What is the point of studying the philosophy of sport?

As has been indicated, philosophy can be considered the oldest discipline in the world: hence why most people can name ancient philosophers rather than ancient scientists, historians, psychologists or political theorists. Philosophy at its core is concerned with understanding the world and our relation to it. Its etymology comes from the Greek meaning 'lover of wisdom', thus indicating that philosophers (or at least genuine philosophers) are seeking convincing and sound answers to problems. They are not content to accept popular opinion or the beliefs of others but rather probe further to whether these beliefs can be justified and ask deeper questions about the assumptions on which these beliefs rest. Many of the early philosophers can be seen as polymaths in that they were interested in a range of subjects and questions. Over the centuries, as our knowledge about the world has developed, and the methods through which we find answers to those questions has matured and become more systematic and rigorous, individuals have increasingly specialized their forms of enquiry to narrower areas. Today individuals tend to concentrate on ever more discrete disciplines, such as biochemistry, social psychology, medieval history, and quantum physics. The advantage in such specialization is that a researcher is able to involve herself in understanding complex problems and issues in far greater depth. The disadvantage however, is that often a novel approach or consideration from an alternative perspective, might yield a better insight into the problem at hand. Therefore a lack of breadth in knowledge across a range of subjects can miss these opportunities. One of the benefits of having a general understanding and interest in a variety of areas and disciplines is that it enables the researcher to apply methods and knowledge in one

area to others. This is arguably one of the strengths in studying sports related subjects and far from being the 'easy' or 'non-serious' academic subject that it is often portrayed as, it demands a lot from its students. Its multi-disciplinary nature requires students to have knowledge about a wide range of subject areas. Most students studying a degree in sport and exercise are introduced to a range of different disciplines and methods of research. This can be challenging to a student who has to master a variety of expectations in each area of study but it also can provide for fruitful and novel research and produces a well-rounded scholar with an array of skills.

Although philosophy often has a reputation for pointless navel gazing or asking irrelevant questions, when it is done well it can be useful in clarifying problems and producing good, well-reasoned and logical arguments. It is important to recognise that philosophy is an activity that requires commitment and practice, in addition to an honest desire to get things right; it is not simply learning about the ideas and theories of other people. This is why it is useful for everyone to be familiar with philosophic methods whatever their area of interest or study.

What methods do philosophers use?

Philosophers essentially ask questions. They can be questions about the justification for a particular belief, for instance, the belief that 'it is right to ban the use of particular substances in sport', or they can be questions about the meaning of particular words, for instance, 'does sport by definition involve competition?'

Perhaps one of the best ways of thinking about the work of a philosopher is to compare it to that of a gardener. When faced with a patch of land that is overgrown and full of rubbish, a gardener has to work out which plants are worth keeping and which are harmful weeds, and then needs to decide how to structure and organise the garden to make best use of what is left. Similarly, when faced with a difficult issue, a philosopher has to decide which arguments and points have some merit and which are baseless and harmful. She then has to put the useful aspects into a coherent and rational order so that they help us understand the nature of the problem and how to best solve it. As such, philosophers rarely come to definitive answers to problems; rather they enable us to see a problem more clearly.

Philosophy is often divided into two schools of thought: Analytic and Continental. This distinction is fairly simplistic as many theorists will often use ideas and methods from

both schools but dividing the methods of philosophy this way provides an indication of how philosophy can be carried out. Essentially, Analytical philosophy is concerned with logical and linguistic analysis, such as whether a conclusion logically and explicitly follows from its premises, or whether the meaning of a word can be formulated through necessary and sufficient conditions. In contrast, Continental philosophy is focused much more on understanding issues by appealing to human sense and experience rather than an abstract logical form. Critics of the Continental approach argue that it is vague, non-specific and without clear rationality. Defenders argue they are able to elucidate answers to real and deep philosophical questions in a much more meaningful way than can be provided through a logical or linguistic analysis. An example of how they differ in response to the same philosophical question can be seen in the chapter two on the definition of sport.

Three analytical methods that are useful in philosophy are: the Socratic method; conceptual analysis; and logical deduction. These are used to good effect in Bernard Suits' book, *The Grasshopper: Games, Life and Utopia*¹². The first two methods will be outlined below and in Chapter 2, whilst the third will be discussed in more detail in Chapters 3 and 5.

What is the Socratic Method?

Socrates is one of the more famous ancient Greek philosophers. He is renowned for defending his right to ask (often difficult and uncomfortable) philosophical questions to the death. His habit of questioning accepted beliefs and the authority of those in power frequently got him into trouble. Eventually, the city authorities were so annoyed with his subordination and the influence he had upon others that he was forced to choose exile or death. He chose to drink a cup of poisonous hemlock over rescinding his right to question and criticise. The legacy he left still influences Western society and education today.

One of the methods that Socrates used to highlight flawed thinking or bad arguments was to ask questions until his opponent ended up at a dead end or contradiction. This is the method that is most often used by those in the legal profession as a way of extracting the truth from defendants or witnesses. Socrates rarely stated his own

¹² Suits, B. (2005) *The Grasshopper: Games, Life and Utopia* (with an introduction by Thomas Hurka). Toronto: Broadview.

opinion on issues: indeed, he is attributed as saying, “The only thing I know is that I know nothing”¹³. Yet Socrates’ modesty belies his sharp and incisive mind that quickly seized upon logical inconsistencies in the arguments given by others.

Suits’ *Grasshopper* uses Socratic dialogue in an attempt to formulate a definition of games and game-playing. The parallels between the life (and death) of Socrates and of Suits’ ‘Grasshopper’ are deliberate. In this extract below, two of his protagonists, Skepticus and Prudence, try to make sense of Grasshopper’s claim that a perfect life is one that is devoted to playing games:

Skepticus [S]: ... I had put it to [Grasshopper] that while all work and no play undoubtedly makes Jack a dull ant, all play and no work makes Jack a dead grasshopper.

Prudence [P]: Yes, you were challenging him to justify his existence.

S: Quite so. And he made three replies to that challenge. The first he called the theological answer and the second he called the logical answer.

P: That’s right.

S: And what about the third answer, Prudence?

P: The third answer was the dream.

S: Yes, a dream about people playing games. That is what is so strange.

...

S:... His first two answers – the theological answer and the logical answer – really amounted to the same thing, did they not? Each was a way of expressing the grasshopper’s determination to remain true to himself, even at the cost of his life.

P: Yes, that’s right.

S. And his remaining true to himself, Prudence, what did that consist in?

P: Why, in refusing to work and insisting upon devoting himself exclusively to play.

S: And what did the words ‘work’ and ‘play’ mean in that context?

¹³ Since Socrates never wrote anything down, it is not clear whether he actually said this but it stems from a passage in Plato’s *Apology*.

P: Pretty much what most people usually mean by those words, I should think. Working is doing things you have to do and playing is doing things for the fun of it.

S: So that for 'play' we could substitute the expression 'doing things we value for their own sake,' and for 'work' we could substitute the expression 'doing things we value for the sake of something else.'

P: Yes. Work is a kind of necessary evil which we accept because it makes it possible for us to do things we think of as being good in themselves.

S: So that under the heading 'play' we could include any number of quite different things: vacationing in Florida, collecting stamps, reading a novel, playing chess, or playing the trombone?

P: Yes, all of those things would count as 'play' as we are using the word. We are using 'play' as equivalent to 'leisure activities.'

S: Then it is clear, is it not, that 'playing,' in this usage, cannot be the same as 'playing games,' since there are many leisure activities, as we have just noted, that are not games.

P: No, they are not the same; playing games is just one kind of leisure activity.

S: Therefore, when the Grasshopper was extolling the life of play he meant by that life, presumably, not doing any specific thing, but doing any of a number of quite different things... So the Grasshopper surely was not arguing that the life he was seeking to justify – the life of the Grasshopper – was identical with just one of these leisure activities. He was not contending, for example, that the life of the Grasshopper is identical with playing the trombone.

P: Of course not, Skepticus, how absurd!

S: Yes, that would be absurd. And that is precisely why I find the Grasshopper's third answer so strange. For in that answer he seemed to be taking the view not that the life of the Grasshopper ought not to consist in leisure activities, but that it ought to consist in playing games. For he began his answer, you will recall, by telling us that he sometimes fancied that everyone alive was really a grasshopper in disguise.

...

P: Well, tell me, Skepticus. What did the Grasshopper say about games?

S: First he presented a definition of games or, to be more precise, a definition of game playing. Then he invited me to subject that definition to a series of tests. I was to advance against the definition the most compelling objections I could devise, and he was to answer those objections.

P: And did the definition withstand your attacks?

S: He was able, or so it seemed to me, to defend the definition against all of my challenges. Furthermore, in the course of meeting those challenges a number of features of game playing not contained in the definition itself were brought to light, so that at the end we had developed a rather elaborated outline, at least, of a general theory of games.

As is indicated in this dialogue; through a series of conjecture and refutation, example and counter-example, Suits presents a robust definition of game-playing¹⁴. The use of the Socratic method enables an interrogation of the logic underlying the various arguments.

What is Conceptual Analysis?

Suits' work is also an excellent example of the philosophic method of conceptual analysis. Disagreements on subjects generally come down to either a difference in fundamental value (for instance, in valuing autonomy over equality) or a confusion or difference over the meaning and use of particular terms. In the dialogue above, Scepticus asks Prudence to clarify what he means by 'work' and 'play'. Although Prudence responds that the words mean what most people generally take them to mean, being forced to clearly define them helps ensure that they are starting from the same point. Suits' *Grasshopper* is essentially a conceptual analysis of the term 'game' and was written in direct response to another philosopher, Wittgenstein, who argued that the word was impossible to define. Even if people ultimately disagree on what a term 'really' means, the method of conceptual analysis is important in laying out the ground clearly and ensuring that subsequent confusion in discussions is reduced. That said, there are often disagreements over the meaning of particular words, as can be seen from the fact that there are already more papers in the philosophy of sport on this very subject than most people would ever wish to read. There was also a disappointing period of history in the early twentieth century whereby much of academic philosophy was dominated by interminable discussion on the meaning of words rather than real philosophical and ethical issues that were affecting the rest of the world. Despite this, conceptual analysis is a vital part of the philosopher's toolkit and helps to ensure the clarity of any resulting discussion.

¹⁴ This definition is outlined in more detail in Chapter 2.

Independent Study Questions:

- *How is philosophy related to other disciplines?*
- *What kinds of issues did scholars consider in the early years of the philosophy of sport?*
- *What kinds of questions can be found in the philosophy of sport?*
- *What methods are used in philosophy and how did Suits employ them in his book?*