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Piper, Steven (2018) Defining sport: conceptions and borderlines. *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport*, 45 (2). pp. 209-213. doi:10.1080/00948705.2018.1454840

Official URL: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00948705.2018.1454840>

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00948705.2018.1454840>

EPrint URI: <https://eprints.glos.ac.uk/id/eprint/5534>

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Book Review

Defining Sport: Conceptions and Borderlines, edited by Shawn Klein, published by Lanham, Lexington Books, 2017, 278pp., £65 (hardcover), ISBN 978-1498511575

Shawn Klein states the dual aim of this book is to encourage scholars of all academic disciplines, new and old, to consider, amongst other things, the ‘...nature, importance, and qualities of sport and related activities...’. Klein also states that this series in particular is calling on those new to the philosophy of sport to bring their expertise, innovative methods, and different questions to standard issues within the discipline in an attempt to explore ‘...well-trodden topics in the literature in a new way, to break out of traditional, perhaps entrenched, conceptual positions within the discipline’.

Klein separates the difficulty of defining sport into two parts: the first part, ‘Conceptions of Sport’, considers some of the highly influential approaches that have been taken to defining sport whilst the second part subjects these approaches to a highly significant ‘stress-test’ via some challenging, perhaps even controversial, examples. These largely contemporary examples might currently be conceived and labelled in popular consciousness (rather kindly) as ‘related activities’ but are given the label ‘Borderline Cases’ as various scholars attempt to define what sport is, what it isn’t, and what it might be.

Klein describes the study of sport as no less than a ‘...study of humanity...’ (p.xi), and notes the difficulties faced when challenging students’ conceptions of sport and their readiness to seek easy definitions that fail to convey a richer notion of what sport ‘is’ (such an accusation could be aimed quite justly at other groups other than students of course, including those in academia). In doing this he clearly identifies the intended audience, namely students of college or University age.

Conscious of the need to add context without becoming too mired in technical and etymological language too early on in the text (and potentially deterring his target audience from reading on) Klein summarises the difficulties in defining sport, particularly in mistakenly focussing on a ‘technical definition’ and its usage. Philosophers, Klein argues, ‘...are not concerned *merely* with the term sport...it is the *concept* with which we are concerned’ (p.xii, emphases added). Here lies the crux of the issue, and indeed the objective of the book itself, to consider and develop a conceptually rigorous definition. Further to this, Klein describes his intent to focus on ‘...find[ing] the rules, for lack of a better word, that tell us what can be united in this idea [of sport] and what cannot...’ (p.xii) rather than fretting over its usage. This rationalises the methodology of the text, and enables a clarity of purpose which runs through the book.

Klein’s contextualisation of ‘Borderline Cases’ skilfully lays out the ease with which one can quite easily dismantle technical definitions of sport simply by naming a sport that does not easily sit within a particular definition or set of definitions. Furthermore, it is in these very ‘borderline’ examples that, Klein surmises, present us with opportunities to explore how to ‘...draw those conceptual boundaries and how to better understand the borderline cases and the paradigmatic ones...’ (p.xiii).

The book comprises thirteen chapters that cover topics such as the ‘nature’ of sport, sport’s cultural significance, Olympic sports and values, historical considerations of early sport and the influence of the media on the perceptions of sport (all in Part 1). Part 2 considers topics such as the

commercialisation of sporting activities, ethical considerations in sport, what part animals might play in our sporting endeavours, before ending with two chapters that consider themes surrounding fantasy and Esports, such as role play, teamwork and many other values that are also displayed in more traditional sports settings.

The first Chapter of this book (A Three-Pointer: Revisiting Three Crucial Issues in the 'Tricky Triad' of Play, Games, and Sport), draws on the work of one of the most influential writers in this discipline: Bernard Suits. Unsurprisingly, Suits' ideas run throughout this text either directly or 'in spirit' but it begins with a direct attempt (by Chad Carlson) to discuss the impact of Suits' approach, and the good-natured discussion that took place between Suits and one of his contemporaries, Klaus Meier, in the 1980's regarding the so-called 'tricky triad'. While both agreed (generally speaking) that games and play were of a similar 'nature', sport, it seemed, became a point of division between the two scholars. Where did it sit in relation to play and games? With play? With games? With neither?

This introductory chapter provides a very steady academic context and platform for the following chapters in the book, beginning with a well-written literature review that certainly sets a reasonably high expectation on the reader (especially student readers) traversing—with a conscious light touch—the relevant works (amongst others) of Caillois, Huizinga, Suits and Meier. Carlson's approach provides a suitable proving ground for the discourse to come, suggesting current conceptions of sport are at best binary, and that a much more subtle course should be taken to ensure an engaged and appropriate consideration of the issues at hand.

Chapter 2 (Broad Internalism and Interpretation: A Plurality of Interpretivist Approaches) by Francisco Javier Lopez Frias, is a somewhat sober attempt to further the discussion around the most appropriate approach to define sport. Outlining a wider categorisation of theoretical approaches before 'drilling down' towards a focus on Interpretivism—a theory greatly influenced by philosophers such as Dworkin, Rorty and McIntyre—and one which attempts to consider (in Robert L. Simon's opinion) the '...best interpretation of the game or an inference to the best explanation of its key elements...' (p.24).

In Chapter 3, (Hopscotch Dreams: The Cultural Significance of Sport) Kevin Schieman discusses a broader cultural view of proceedings in an attempt to consider any possible definition of sport. Drawing on Suits' conception of what makes sport a sport, Schieman echoes the sentiments of the Editor by stating that his argument does not concern the sort of dictionary definition often (and all too easily) doled out. His focus on—to borrow the Suitsian phrase—a sport having a wide following and being stable, is a timely one, given the increasingly pervasive cultural influence that sport has had on society. Schieman suggests that what is important about this is not that it is usually an accurate way to consider sport, but *why* it is important, namely that it should suggest that such an activity could be described as a 'good game' and that structural and institutional consequences are brought about by this 'good game'. Using a broad Aristotelian approach, Schieman sets about his task, citing that 'good games' should '...continually challenge us...requir[ing] us to perform tasks that are difficult to master...' (p.55) and those games should '...be able to continually challenge us because they are strategically complex...' (p.55). Schieman uses some interesting examples to coherently explain his thinking, touching on a range of diverse examples such as Esports, CrossFit and Quidditch in an attempt to explore a definition. The light-hearted tone of this chapter is very appealing, and is balanced by some very probing questions which attempt to make us the question the status quo, especially concerning long established sports (such as American football) which frequently cause

serious life threatening injuries and raise some very searching questions regarding exactly why some sports are played at all, or rather who exactly it is that gains politically or financially in these human endeavours that requires one human being to hurt another to gain a yard, score a goal or win a point.

Heather Reid's focus shifts the conversation onto an attempt to define what makes a sport an 'Olympic Sport' (Chapter 4: Defining Olympic Sport). Reid's writing has always provided clear and succinct reasoning, supported by superb historical underpinning, particularly in this area, and this chapter is no different. In particular this chapter is useful in demystifying and debunking many commonly held (mis)conceptions that surround Olympic sport. Reid is also adept at deconstructing often complex historical Greek terms, such as 'arete' (excellence) and 'eudaimonia' (human happiness) and repurposing them within the framework of 'Olympism' and sport more widely. This is particularly pertinent when one considers the power that the Olympics has in seemingly turning fringe 'lifestyle activities' into 'proper' sports, simply by adding them to the Olympic program. Far from an exercise in self-aggrandisement (although such a charge could well be appropriate for the IOC), Reid suggests a moral 'call to arms' whereby an activity, should it be bestowed the title 'Olympic' should express and reflect the values of Games itself, that of '...human excellence...a commitment to fair play and promote peace...' (p.75).

In Chapter 5 (Early Modern Athletic Contests: Sport or not Sport?) by John McClelland we return to familiar themes discussed in early chapters, namely the interplay and relationships between work and play. McClelland also includes war, and in this chapter you can certainly understand why, for war (and war games) was the basis of many of the sports we know and love today, and McClelland is eager to draw on a myriad of examples throughout history to support this. The section on the 'Historical Uses of Sport' is particularly enlightening, and makes an interesting companion piece with some of Reid's work in the preceding chapter.

The final chapter in Part 1 (Chapter 6: The Impact of Mass Media on the Definition of Sport) written by Keith Strudler, brings the reader firmly into the present day, with a thought-provoking account of 'mass-media', with particular focus on the proliferation of sports channels that seem to have an increasingly pervasive influence what 'sports' receive air-time and how they are portrayed to the watching audience. Suits looms large over the rest of this chapter, and Strudler sympathetically expresses the anxiety felt by all who enjoy sport when discussing the contradictions, and general conflicts of interest that arise when attempting to reconcile—amongst things—Suits' famous 'lusury attitude' (p.102) with many of the media expectations that seem to stifle the natural spectacle of sport. It seems inevitable, then, that the commodification of sport by powerful broadcasting companies and other media will have an effect on what sport 'is' or 'might be'.

What sport 'is' or 'might be' consumes the first three chapters of Part 2 in this book, namely the 'Borderline Cases' that are meant to challenge the reader's preconceptions and assumptions on possible definitions of sport. Chapter 7: 'Borderline Cases: CrossFit, Tough Mudder, and Spartan Race' by Pam Sailors, Sarah Teetzel and Charlene Weaving put forward some interesting cases that invoke arguments from the previous section and allude to an evolution of some of the 'war games' and military training that shaped many of the activities discussed in this chapter. It also worth noting that the activities mentioned have all been very successful in their 'branding', and in creating (to use marketing vernacular) a 'USP' to expand their global reach, alluding to many of the themes mentioned in previous chapters concerning the commercialisation of sport.

This theme is discussed more directly in Chapter 8 ('Evolution of the Action Sports Setting' by Chrysostomos Giannoulakis and Lindsay Pursglove) and perhaps a case *for* the commodification and 'packaging' of so-called 'extreme sports' into something more palatable for mainstream audiences. But what does this mean for the sports themselves? Does such an approach dilute the purity of these sports, or do these sports challenge the very meaning of sport itself by their inclusion? Chapter 9 (Skateboarding, Sport, and Spontaneity: Toward a Subversive Definition of Sport by Brian Glenney) completes the 'new sport' chapter triumvirate with an incredibly playful piece of writing which seems to exude the same subversive tone of his subject matter. Glenney insists that a rebellion against the strict rules of sport is necessary to ensure the evolution of sport itself, using famous examples to support his theory that an essential part of any sporting activity is the bending and breaking of rules, a creativity of the human spirit that pushes the boundaries of what a particular individual (or team) is capable of in terms of sporting excellence.

Chapter 10 ('Bullfighting: The Mirror and Reflection of Spanish Society' by Teresa Gonzalez Aja) very carefully attempts to unpack what is undoubtedly viewed as a controversial activity, bullfighting. Gonzalez Aja attempts to explain how bullfighting does not easily 'fit' in any particular conception of sporting activity, but rather is a strange blend of many cultural conceptions; an art, a sport, an exhibition, an event so intertwined with its people that in many senses it cannot be undone. Ethical misgivings aside, this chapter is wonderfully emotive and establishes the need to consider the deeply rooted traditions, biographies and histories of a given society into any possible definition of sport.

Chapter 11 takes an interesting turn as Joan Grassbaugh Forry considers the condition of 'voluntary play' when discussing the conceptualisation of sporting activities that involve animals ('Why Some Animal Sports Are Not Sports'). This chapter has a particularly strong ethical flavour which is reiterated throughout Forry's work, in fact it plays an essential part in clarifying the human-animal dynamic within sport and play. But the key to any definitional attempt within this dynamic is the concept of what constitutes 'voluntary play' on the part of the animal, and Forry successfully articulates what does and *does not* meet what she describes as the '...basic condition of voluntary play...' (p.191) in her attempt to update and include the part animals have in any proposed definitions of sport.

Chapter 12, by Brody J. Ruhlley, Andrew Billings and Coral Rae, entitled 'The Mainstreaming of Fantasy Sport: Redefining Sport' attempts to legitimize a credible claim for fantasy sports. To a large extent the authors are successful in this regard, and while they do acquiesce in terms of 'fantasy play' being considered a sport, they are successful in suggesting that such activities are having an influence on how we consider sport in general.

The final Chapter, by Joey Gawrysiak (Chapter 13: 'E-sport: Video Games as Sport'), is probably the most 'borderline' of all the borderline cases in the book. Gawrysiak certainly makes a good case for Esports, perhaps all too aware of the evitable cynicism with which his claim will be met; he contextualises competitive Esports in settings that very much mirror traditional sporting structures.

There is an endearing honesty of endeavour to this book that renders it difficult not to be persuaded by many of the claims made by its various contributors. That is not to say that this book is naïve or lacking philosophical 'heft', indeed, quite the opposite is true. One of the main strengths of this book is that it has achieved something fundamentally necessary for any philosophical work to be successful: it has taken complex concepts and ideas and distilled them into something palatable enough for students to understand, but robust enough for scholars to refer to. It has also successfully taken work by

philosophers fundamental to the discipline (Suits, Meier and Huizinga most notably) and found fresh ways to build on their fundamental ideas and concepts. This book is a fine addition to the philosophy of sport, and will ensure that students and academics alike will continue to engage in the questions that surround any attempt to define what sport is or could be for years to come.

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