

Sport: Essentially Described *Martin Bertman*

Sport is an artificial social product, a sub-set of the category of games. It is therefore open to an epistemological essentialism, which may be contrasted to an ontological essentialism suggested in the Platonic tradition. An epistemological essentialism, like ontological essentialism, presents clear characteristics of a rule determined order and therefore normative structure. Bracketing an ultimate or hoped for ontological essentialism, even with natural matters, this has been adumbrated by the Eleatic Stranger in Plato's late dialogues: *Sophist* and *Statesman*. It is the method of Hobbes in claiming a science of politics. Historical states and historical games called sports may lack certain characteristics of the normative definition; depending on the cultural allowance, some of these may be allowed as sport. The essential epistemological method therefore results from interest and is useful when its range embraces the most important historical characteristics of the matter, which narrows arbitrariness. Further, it provides a clear measure for considering candidates for the defined matter and distinct boundaries for those things that fall outside its regulative structure. The essential definition of sport is made by constitutive rules that create such a clear and distinct norm.

Let us consider it. Sport implies an independently created world, that is, a particular sport is always created by definite rules for determining the order and boundary of play or action. These constitutive rules are for a contest whose goal is victory. In Greek, *athletos* means competition for the sake of victory. In a complex sport, especially team sports like football, in addition to constitutive rules, there are also many regulative rules, useful but less fundamental. Their task is to maintain and temper the integrity of play within the constitutive rules, e.g. time-outs, out of bounds, etc. When the constitutive rules are changed, a new sport is produced; this is not the case with the less structurally important, more flexible regulative rules.

The policing function for both types of rules demands the authority of a referee or judge. The judge is outside the order for play but necessary by enforcing it, in the course of play. Sport is ideational; a sport demands the specific nexus of its particular constitutive rules and play within those rules.

A fundamental corollary of the idea of sport is that any specific culture is merely a secondary condition determining its norm, despite its economic, technological and aesthetic influence. The sociological or cultural mode undoubtedly influences normative attitudes toward sport, especially about its social value. Economic, religious, political interests and ideologies do affect sport, particularly in terms of the psychology of the audience. Nevertheless, from the viewpoint of its essential determination, that is, formally, a sport is independent of cultural factors. The historical expression that suggests a trans-cultural orientation by universal biological capacity is simple sports, like running and lifting competitions, which express primary physical capacities. The ancient Olympics, in its religious cultural frame, lasting from 776 b. c. for 1030 years without interruption, provides the closest historical viewpoint for the epistemological definition of sport.

Another fundamental aspect about sport is that it is psychologically attractive to human beings by providing both stable rules in partnership with the excitement of play to bring a measure of unpredictability. One cannot predict who will have the victory. The outcome is a combination of skill, the harder to measure emotional strength of the competitors, and fortune.

Indeed, this combination of the known and unknown allows sport to be a symbol of the social order because merging conditions of a structured known, in the civil law, and a contingent unknown, the various actions of citizens, are the factors of political action.¹ Indeed, most social forms provide expectation – legal systems, economic principles, customs like those of hospitality, dress, and sexual relations have a measure of formal or informal rules to guide expectations; yet, compared to the constitutive rules that create a particular sport, they are less stable, less independent, and consequently more ambiguous. Unlike sport, social orders, without a choice to do so, are open to the fundamental transformation of structure by unpredictable conditions; further, these social structures are not very structured, often made of compromises, they have ambiguity and contradictions that drive change. Nevertheless, cultural rules have some gravity to stabilize an evolving social and political situation. Firmer in creating an order for action, sport can stand in a symbolic relation to these fungible orders.

The importance of this symbolic relation is sport captures the ontology of the human condition and the psychological response to it. It can represent the tension between stability and uncertainty in action because rules do not make for a mathematical determination in action, a leaden deadness. It is a game without an algorithm offering the specific action of an excitement in the present moment of play, the excitement of action.

Now, I shall elaborate on its structural character. Sport is a physical game, but the game theory is applicable to human activities aside from sport; specifically, it is similar to a legal system or order. Therefore, sport's defining characteristics must be given beyond the formal characteristic of being a game or universe of rules within which activity necessarily takes place; further sport must be considered beyond its efficient characteristic of competition, since that also applies to activity within a legal system and many other systematized activities. By the way, the ancient Olympics had a decisive notion of competition, which, unlike the modern Olympics, only honoured the winner, not the runners-up.

An appropriate characterization of sport provides an understanding of competition. The material characteristic of various sports is not helpful for this task. Equipment and the nature of the field of play is not helpful because it defines use without the rigor of relating use to specific rules and, if it did, that would not provide an essential definition but only a specific one of a particular sport. Indeed, material conditions vary greatly from game to game. Wittgenstein has brought to attention that games have their activity in a variety of formalized conditions, i.e. as board games or on some sort of field, say a track or a ring or a rink: a designed or ordered physical area, composed of various numbers of persons, using living and not living equipment, etc. Consequently, the mentioned characteristics are too wide to define sport. Put briefly, Wittgenstein's skepticism about an essential definition of game, of which sport is a sub-division, misfires because of his attention to specific differences among sport.

The historical survey defies unification and, like Wittgenstein, those that appropriate this method fall back on social conventions.

In seeking an essential definition, let us narrow the universe of discourse somewhat by considering sport's need of an authority for judgments, the above reference to referee or judge. Authority protects and interprets rules by attending to play within them. Many games like chess or card games are contests and competitions but they are not a sport, since in such games the rules are known in principle to the competitors and no authority is necessary to judge any action within the game; the policing is done by the players themselves. Further, many non-sport games are algorithmic, whether in terms of a human competitor like chess or a machine competitor, like packman.

Notably, by the introduction of an authoritative judgment for a warranted action of a game, we understand that practice or self-orientation in a mere physical exercise is not sport. One's competition with oneself may be preliminary to a sport or merely an aesthetic or health activity. It lacks competition among separate individuals for victory. Notably, the rather dull-minded Latin slogan of the modern Olympics, 'citius, altius, fortius' (faster, higher, stronger), does not present a more informative value than the betterment of physical performance. It suggests a conceptual laxity of our culture.

In any case, what is important for the further characterization of sport is to differentiate the sort of authoritative judgment involved in sport from other judgments in systematic or quasi-systematic activities. At first sight, the referee may be considered to have a minor role in the sport because the referee is compared with the competitors of the sport. However, his importance is crucial. He is the 'ideal spectator' whose judgment asserts the structure of the game as it is instantiated in actual play. Because the judge in sport - a referee or umpire - is in a primary sense, under the clarity of constitutive rules, his or her intent is to be clear in making decisions as much as possible. Therefore, the condition for measurement is important; consequently, quantitative rather than qualitative considerations must determine sport, though an actual sport may provide some allowance for a small qualitative factor, assuming cultural generosity.

In sum, the primary task of the judge is whether a particular play is in concert with the rules that constitute the universe of the sport. Only in a secondary sense, when penalties are assigned, is there a distinct qualitative aspect to judgment within rules. These regulative rules are similar to rules about such matters as the presentation of evidence and other procedural matters in a court of law - regulative rules - rather than about the constitutive rules of civil law, the business of a Supreme Court. Judging involves clarity; thus, say ice dancing, whose performance aspects for victory include music, grace, costume, is a contest whose qualitative margin invariably depends on cultural aesthetics, which are moot. The clarity necessary for sport is muddled. Such contests, some allowed by cultural conventions to be called a sport, is unlike a foot race or a discus throw. The victor in these is the first that passes the finish or throws the furthest, without consideration in the judgment for victory of the grace of the performance.

In contrast to sport, there is no need to have a referee in some games. Games of blind chance are certainly not sport since they involve no exercise of ability; on the other

hand, card games, chess, etc. involve intellectual competence and thus are competitions with the goal of victory but their play does not need a referee because all their rules are constitutive and, in play, immediately known to the players.

Another matter, one of value: all games, including sport, no matter how strenuous, or how they relate to the social processes of work and finance, are for the sake of refreshment or entertainment, in principle. According to the Greeks, games and sport are not work since they are for the sake of honour; the Greeks distinguished baunistic from dynamic activity on an elitist principle is rather lost or misplaced in our culture. The former is grunt labour the other is action for the sake of honour. Since sport need not be done for survival, it falls into an activity whose action is done for the better in principle, particularly, for the sake of honour. Indeed, in the pagan world, honour is in the mode of a pagan culture with its nature religion. Victory in sport is a proper relation to nature, a sort of worship. This was a perspective of nature in its 'positive' gifting of the human condition.

Further, the Greek Olympics were a time of truce, the forbidding of war and was only for free men, not slaves. Competition in sport is not rivalry, with its negative intent to win at any price, say like the gladiatorial contests of the Romans where all were slaves of the Emperor and, in principle, loss could mean death. Consequently, without competition there is no sport therefore the love of sport implies friendship bond to the competitor who is necessary for the activity.

Certainly, when speaking of values, no sociological consideration would discount the business of sport with its various promotional and financial activities. Indeed, granted the expected financial rewards for winning athletes of the ancient Olympics, gain as well as honor has always been a motive of athletes. It is a grandmother's tale that even the best in human beings throws the shadow of the worst. However, these 'human-all-too-human' motivations are tangential to the activity itself. Similarly, for a physician, whatever his personal motivations for being one –wealth, social prestige, etc. - these are tangential to the professional or structural obligation to treat his patient toward better health. Sport in a sociological description of its character and tendencies in a particular society is an additional topic of research but tangential to its essential structure. Some of the specific cultural determinants of sport, like any social activity, are in tension with an ideal descriptive or normative approach to the activity. Under the influence of Baron Coubertin, starting with the first modern Olympics in 1896, the modern Olympics tries, with little success, to restrain financial gain and commercialism by pressing for amateurism.

Beyond pointing out the limits of sociological or historical examples to offer a universal and essential notion of sport, I do not want to pursue value questions beyond pointing out that sport competition seen in the ancient Olympic orientation provides the ground for a work-ethic about sport. This is not quite an ethics but is sufficient for the normative narrowness of an epistemologically essentialist notion of sport. Competition ordered by what we intuitively call 'sportsmanlike behaviour' or fairness about the equal condition to prove the quality of a victor is the condition of the activity. Importantly, with some further considerations about social behaviour, the normative 'work-ethic of sport can expand to project a normative character for sport audiences.

What I now wish to do, in consideration of the above remarks, is to provide the essential definition of sport and, then, to classify four broad sub-classes of sport. The definition: Sport is a class of games, where there is competition, under equal conditions, for a quantitatively measured victory, in terms of a physical powers or skills, between or among human beings, where a referee enforces constitutive rules creating the structure of a particular sport and regulative rules aiding play. The important psychological concerns that sport structure provides is stability. Stability is in the known order of the structure that provides for the undetermined, excitement of play. The action of play is always open to unexpected possibility, e.g. the physical injury of an athlete, the unexpected expression of capacity of an athlete, etc. The psychological combination of stability and the excitement of play, with its unpredictable quality, are psychologically satisfying to human beings. This definition provides the normative ground to examine the sub-classes of sport. The four are single individual sport, team sport, animal and human collaborative sport, and machine and human collaborative sport. The first marks the Olympic attitude; individual contests and is the best expression of the normative definition. It is noteworthy that the laurel of victory was given to the winner of Olympic competitions, with the exception of the chariot race. In this collaboration among man, machine, and animal the owner and not the driver gets the laurel.

Let us consider team sport. Here the responsibility is no longer on the individual who competes for victory. One has a social effort where even the non-directly playing strategic coach is a factor for victory. This is more than a trainer of an individual; the strategic coach is a direct factor of the play. Consequently, responsibility in the team is projected to a social organization. With the complexity of team-sport, like in other complex political associations, there is the matter of proper relations among players. An added dimension of sportsmanship demands the struggle for victory obliges the individual players to sacrifice personal advantages (say for glory) for the sake of the most efficient strength of the unit's performance. With the complexity of multiple individual actions in the course of play, the role of the referee becomes more crucial and the regulative rules, e.g., off-sides, physical improprieties, etc., are more elaborate. Yet, team-sport still functions closely to the normative definition.

The non-human collaborative sport classes have a specific problem that slides them into not being sports at all. It is when the animal or machine overwhelms human qualities in the competitive unit. Let us consider, man-animal sport. Of course, the essential definition precludes animal against animal contests to be a sport. In say cock fighting, there is a human trainer, but the so to speak 'responsibility' for the action is animal. Let us consider the sport of horseracing with a jockey. Here the skill of the jockey counts toward victory. Yet, in this class of sport, the factor of the non-human obscures the condition of human competition. A good jockey on a bad horse or vice-versa changes the outcome.

With machine-sport, the imbalance in the collaborative unity is further exacerbated. Granted, our ever increasing technological sophistication, the human element can recede or slide to the point where it no longer plausible to account it and therefore to have a sport under the essential definition. If not in car races, in airplane and boat races, the machine can be so sophisticated that the human input occurs in only unusual and extreme circumstances, say of weather. Further, the responsibility for victory in machinesport becomes enlarged and, consequently, vague. Machines

depend on what John Dewey called 'social intelligence.' They are the product of technological workers in the social-political complex of industry and government. The car race, aside from the driver, and his team to service the car, the workers, engineers, and inventors of metallurgy, electrical systems, aerodynamic design, etc are responsible for the machine component of the competitive sport unit. In machine-sport, the human element expands in responsibility, while the machine aspect of the unit tends to overwhelm the human aspect in the actual collaboration at the actuality of the race. Further granted that technology is a social product such sports live with a disallowing condition in fact for some human beings. It is unlike the biologically simple sports, e.g. running, which is open to all human beings both in principle and in fact. This suggests a cultural rather than physical disallowance; the latter is exemplified by basketball played between a Zulu and pigmy team.

Of course, not all machines in sport are collaborative. They are tools. For example, a discus or javelin thrown is a mere tool. The broadly similar tool presents the human capacity within the contest. If target shooting uses the same gun it is a tool; however, in gun contests, even using dissimilar guns but within an allowable range of difference, the skill of the shooter dominates the contest and one cannot therefore consider the gun a machine collaborator. The same is true of sophisticated machines like boats.

However, in the last instance, one notes another factor that diminishes the test of some specific human capacity between individuals. The playing field can be strikingly different. The change of weather affecting performance brings an element of chance into play that is quite great in qualifying human capacity. There is a violation of equal conditions; yet, one might plead leniency and consider even such a boat race a sport, taking it under the rubric of fortune, to which all sport action is subject.

To continue with considerations of stretching or moving beyond the boundary of sport, I shall elaborate on the mentioned aesthetic qualitative matter. Aesthetic theory has three value foci: the artist (here the value of sport to the athlete), the audience (here the sport spectator), and the created object or work of art (here, this formal focus is either the game played or the schema of constitutive rules that creates the game). Of course, the best theories try to satisfy all three foci, e.g. Aristotle's *Poetics*.

If we take aesthetic in a large psychological sense as in its first use from the Greek *aisthesis* (perception) by Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, a German philosopher of the first part of the 17th century, we capture an ease for further theorizing about sport. Though my present interest is in terms of the boundary of the essential definition of sport, it is important to say immediately that the aesthetic aspects to athlete and spectator of play are valuable and merit consideration in complete theory of the value of sport. This sort of theory would move toward the psychological factors that include an enlarged sense of perception, which mingles aesthetic and ethics in a viewpoint about what is proper for human action and concern. As mentioned, in a narrower consideration that the judgment of contests of the perception of quality must be disputed. Consider: aside from chauvinistic loyalty or political hanky-panky, say French, Chinese and Russian judges of music and dance have different cultural inclinations on which their judgment is grounded. This could make a difference in those sports where the aesthetic spectacle is part of judgment for victory. Consequently, when the determination of the victory in the contest has little physical

quantification, e.g. ballroom dancing falls too far away from the essential definition to be a sport.

To characterize the boundary considerations in the last three subclasses of sport implicitly I have employed principles of equality, proportion or balance, and responsibility. These principles bridge a task-ethic and a full ethic of human activity. A determinative justification of them deserves discussion but that would involve a length of time not available here. Principles of equality, proportion and responsibility elaborate the conceptual understanding of sport. They are in a dialectical relation to sport definition and the systematic elements of a particular sport. Within a systematic and functional understanding of sport, responsibility is a work-ethic concept, the relation of action to sport structure in a functional determination; however, when related to social matters it moves toward a more ethical engagement. Responsibility is an aesthetic qua ethical quality of action; since action necessarily results from intention, responsibility is necessarily purposive.

Proportion or balance provides an intellectual condition for action whereas the principle of equality is a boundary determiner of fairness. Prudence is the human response to human limitations. Prudence accepts modes of human constructions for achieving limited grounds for pleasure and need: these are structured orders with a final causal goal. Many activities, including sport, are appropriate within the largesse of the penumbra of the human condition, a pragmatic seeking for balance, responsibility and equality. This allows limited purpose; it allows the appreciation of sport within a sense of limited value that speaks to the boundaries of the human condition.

Principles of responsibility and balance extended moving from larger consideration to sport find it reasonable, within the measure of such allowance. Of course, the reasonable is open to some dispute within its direction toward strictness. However, it seems that balance allows toleration for what is not definitely harmful. The partnership of participating entities of sport relates proportional involvement of human skill to the capacity of the other elements of the combined entity: the ordering of powers for victory. However, since sport disallows the human factor to become submerged as primary factor by either machine or animal, there seems no exact formula for the proportion of a collaborative unity.

The principle of proportion, grounded in prudence, is intimate to the principle of responsibility. In a broad sense, responsibility for an athlete is a work ethic or task-responsibility. The human will functions directly in the competitive entity when played to make sport not merely a social product but a direct human action. The fundamental responsibility is a commitment to obeying the rules of a sport, as well as act in terms of player's function for victory. Thus, the three principles enlarge the application of rules of the game. The Greek language has the words for cause (*aitia*) and responsibility (*aitios*) correlatively interlocked. In a word sport implies a moral agent capable of sportsmanship and taking on a role in a responsible manner within the rules of play.

These three principles illuminate and extend in detail the essential definition of sport and qualify play. They persuade but, since they are not a proof and merely move in the range of prudence, that persuasion is debatable: it may not produce conviction.

Yet, every culture must necessarily employ them under an aesthetic or perception of the prudential functioning for its sports. That enlarged sense of aesthetic, with both conventional and biological considerations, is a psychology that must judge whether sport is an activity that is worth the individual's time.

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¹ It is notable that Hegel's final political determination of the state has just these qualities, though it seems unlikely to be achievable within nature. The artifice of sport is more closely expressed in Hobbes' notion of the constructed state but his view that the natural theorems and the laws of the state are harmonious is an obvious leap into a normative ideal as well. Cf. my *Hobbes: The Natural and Artifactual Good* (Lang: 1981).