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Investigation of philosophical perspectives on sports education

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Abstract

Philosophy of Sport is an area of philosophy that seeks to conceptually analyze issues of sport as human activity. These issues cover many areas, but fall primarily into three philosophical categories: metaphysics, ethics and moral philosophy, and political philosophy. The philosophical perspective on sport originated in Ancient Greece, having experienced a revival in the latter part of the 20th century with the work of Paul Weiss and Howard Slusher. A philosophical perspective on sports incorporates its metaphysical relationships with art and play, ethical issues of virtue and fairness and more broadly socio-politics. The philosophy of sport is concerned with the conceptual analysis and interrogation of key ideas and issues of sports and related practices. At its most general level, it is concerned with articulating the nature and purposes of sport. The philosophy of sport not only gathers insights from the various fields of philosophy as they open up our appreciation of sports practices and institutions, but also generates substantive and comprehensive views of sport itself. The philosophy of sport is never fixed: its methods demand an inherently self-critical conception of intellectual activity; one that challenges its own preconceptions and guiding principles continuously both as to the nature and purposes of philosophy and of sports. Important questions in Philosophy of Sport are concerned with the social virtues of sport, the aesthetics of sporting performances and display, the epistemology of individual and team strategy and techniques, sporting ethics, the logic of rules in sport, metaphysics of sport as a component of human nature or instinct, etc.

Keywords: Sport, philosophy, ethics, metaphysics, aesthetics, mind-body, athletic etc.

Introduction

Ancient Greece is considered the birthplace of both ancient philosophy and Olympic sport. Hellenistic philosophies hung great significance on athletic performance. A leader's athletic prowess, according to the view of the times, reflected their ability to lead. (Games of the Phaeacians in Homer's *Odyssey* in *The Iliad* and *Odyssey*) Sport was seen as an epistemic inquiry, a methodological process by which we learn the objective truth of a person's athletic potential by actualizing it in athletic competition. Athletics as a measure of individual worth was seen as a cure to social inequality. Sport was even seen as moral education, with Plato advocating the participation of women in sport for their moral enrichment. Aristotle emphasized physical activity as an ethical responsibility. Mentions of sport were also found in the work of Socrates.

Contemporary philosophy of sport

The philosophy of sport is concerned with the conceptual analysis and interrogation of key ideas and issues of sports and related practices. At its most general level, it is concerned with articulating the nature and purposes of sport. The philosophy of sport not only gathers insights from the various fields of philosophy as they open up our appreciation of sports practices and institutions, but also generates substantive and comprehensive views of sport itself. The philosophy of sport is never fixed: its methods demand an inherently self-critical conception of intellectual activity; one that challenges its own preconceptions and guiding principles continuously both as to the nature and purposes of philosophy and of sports.

The resurgence of interest in Philosophy of Sport was marked by Yale philosopher Paul Weiss' book publication *Sport: A Philosophical Inquiry* (1969), considered the first book-length text in Philosophy of Sport. In it, Weiss explains the dearth of work in Philosophy of Sport as a reflection of academic elitism. Sport was always considered vulgar or common, according to Weiss. Long before this, however, philosophical considerations of sport and physical activity were discussed as a subset of educational reform in the late 19th century as the link between physical education and health and well-being gained appreciation

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among scholars. To many of the time, the health and educational benefits of physical activity were a component of public life. Inadvertently, many non-philosopher proponents of physical education took on philosophical positions on teleology, mind-body dualism and metaphysics as part of their model of human agency and personhood. In a broader context, political philosophy entered the picture as thinkers of the time, in response to pressing social and political issues of the day associated civic duty, responsible citizenship and other political features to sport. While much of the focus has been on the work done in the west, philosophers of sport acknowledge the importance of work done in the east, particularly Japan.

Purpose of the study

It has most specifically interrogated substantive issues in the following sub-fields of philosophy as exemplified within sport and related human activities involving the use of the body in social practices and institutions. Other areas of intersection with contemporary areas of philosophy include Philosophy of Education, Philosophy of Law, Philosophy of Mind, Philosophy of Rules, Philosophy of Science and Social and political philosophy.

Issues in philosophy of sport

Ethical issues in Philosophy of Sport predominantly center on athlete behavior in relation to rules of the game, other athletes, spectators, external factors such as socioeconomic issues among supporters and communities, and issues of doping. Issues of doping focus on the ethics of medical intervention on athletic performance-what is acceptable versus what is not, and how boundaries can be drawn. Particular attention is given to the question of what factors ought to be taken into consideration when banning certain medical interventions. These and other issues are usually compared and contrasted through the lenses of three significant moral theories: Consequentialism, Deontology and Virtue-Ethics.

Body of knowledge

Being a form of philosophical discourse, the philosophy of sport embodies the formal and contextual character of the parent discipline: philosophy. Unlike the biomedical sciences of sport, philosophers (just like social scientists and humanities scholars) generate research that is overtly reflective of its non-theory neutrality. Intellectual progress can be made in philosophy and the philosophy of sport without presupposing an idea of linear development - or at least largely shared view of cumulative, commensurable, knowledge - that is assumed within the natural or biomedical sciences of sport.

Methodology

Although early analytical philosophers saw themselves elucidating the concepts others used in their sports talk and research, there is a clear sense in which we can say the empirical researchers of the natural and social sciences and the humanities have themselves become much more sophisticated in their conceptual approaches to sports related research. So, one of the traditional roles of the philosophers of sport, to clear the conceptual ground for others to carry out their research, has diminished - though it is never likely to disappear altogether. In politics as in ethics and other branches of study there will always be disputes about what

constitutes “democratic processes” or “good character” for these debates are ineliminable from the field itself. Yet the convergence of the conceptual and empirical cuts both ways. Philosophers of sport themselves are paying much greater attention to the processes and outcomes of empirical research.

Nevertheless, their focus remains exclusively conceptual in character. Every philosopher worthy of the name still seeks to get things right – even if there is no clear and undisputed sense of what the truth of matters might be. Its task is, through dialogue, to aim at the truth by close attention to valid argumentation entailing the clear explication of ideas that aim towards truth. In this sense, philosophy does not try to be pure, nor do philosophers of sport attempt to view sports as if they were in a position of complete neutrality, as is presupposed in positivistic research. The old philosophical ideal of philosopher as an ideal spectator embodies a view of sports worlds from nowhere in particular within those worlds. Such a view has largely disappeared in contemporary philosophy of sport. In a clear sense, then, philosophy is returning to its ancient promise to bring wisdom to bear on important matters that concern us (in sports) and not merely to the detailed technical analysis of key concepts.

Discussion

The Fields of Philosophy and their Application in Philosophy of Sport.

The philosophy of sport then, is characterized by conceptual investigations into the nature of sport and related concepts, areas and professions. It draws upon and develops many of the diverse branches of the parent discipline, philosophy, and reflects abroad church of theoretical positions and styles.

- Aesthetics (e.g., is sport a form of art? are sports events works of art? can we objectively evaluate sports actions aesthetically?)
- Epistemology (e.g., can kinesthetic awareness properly be called knowledge? what precisely do we know when we are able to perform skills? must a coach have performance knowledge at elite level to coach effectively at that level?)
- Ethics (e.g., does sport necessarily develop good character? what do we agree to when we agree to play a game? is there such a thing as the ethos of sports?)
- Logic (e.g., are sports separate from other spheres of logic by their nature? are the concepts of sport and game logically discrete?)
- Metaphysics (e.g., are humans naturally game playing animals?)
- Philosophy of education (e.g., can we morally educate through sport? is paternalism in sports coaching and teaching inevitable? What do we mean by the concept “sport skill”?)
- Philosophy of law (e.g., can children give consent to engage in elite sports training? do rules underdetermine conduct?)
- Philosophy of mind (e.g., is mental training just a form of imagination? are sportspersons simply to be thought of as machines?)
- Philosophy of rules (e.g., are regulative sports rules just a species of constitutive ones?)
- Philosophy of science (e.g., is there such a thing as a singular method for all science? what does sports

scientist mean when they say a given statistical procedure has explanatory power? why do sports psychologists ignore the (post) Freudian tradition?)

- Social and political philosophy (e.g., did a pure conception of sport ever exist in a given social and political time and order? are sports competition necessarily capitalistic in nature? do sports institutions always corrupt pure play?).

East and west: The traditions of philosophy

Despite the diversity of these fields of applied philosophy in sport, there has been a tendency for one philosophical tradition to dominate: analytical philosophy. This is not to deny that continental philosophy has not developed a sport philosophical literature. Indeed the labels themselves are somewhat misleading- and both, being traditions of western philosophy take no significant account of Eastern philosophy, which in Japan notably has spawned a significant volume of sport philosophical literature.

Given that philosophical research is always and everywhere internally related to the expression of ideas, the idiom of that expression somewhat shapes the boundaries of what can be said. In contrast to the idea that the biomedical sciences of sport represent a universal language housed in technical rationality (“the” scientific method) philosophers working in the continental tradition have largely developed research within the fields of existentialism, hermeneutics and phenomenology. Although the label is itself driven by geographical considerations (the work emanated from communities of scholars in Continental Europe), one finds philosophers of sport right across the globe drawing upon those traditions. Similarly, analytical philosophy though the dominant tradition in the Anglo-American tradition of Western Philosophy is misleading in the sense that some of its founding fathers were indeed from Continental Europe. The drawing of distinctions to represent our experience of the world, however, is common to all schools or traditions of philosophical and sport philosophical endeavour. Given the dominance of the analytic tradition in the English-speaking world, a few more specific words are required in order to make sense of recent developments in the philosophy of sport.

Analytical philosophy emerged as an essentially conceptual enquiry whose aim was foundational. It is often captured in Locke’s famous remark about philosophical work being akin to an under labourer working in the garden of knowledge. As a second-order activity, its central aim was to provide secure foundations for other disciplines by articulating their conceptual geography.

Its pre-eminence was captured by the insistence that conceptual work precedes all proper empirical enquiry. Its exponents were equipped with the analytical tools of dissecting concepts for constituent criteria, drawing conceptual distinctions by their logical grammar and seeking fine-grained differences in their employment. In some quarters, the discipline of philosophy was reduced to the detailing of ordinary linguistic usages and their necessary and sufficient conditions in order to detect the proper meaning (or essence) of concepts that others had to operate with and between. Despite this “new” direction there remained a strong sense of continuity here with the ancient past. Philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle too were concerned with making distinctions, bringing clarity

where before there was puzzlement or, worse, commonsensical acquiescence.

Many philosophers argue now that we are in a period of post-analytical philosophy. What this means is not entirely clear. We are living through a period of exciting intellectual development in the subject, which is very much reflected in the Philosophy of Sport. While the careful attention to conceptual analysis will always be an essential component of the philosophers’ toolkit, research-driven analyses of the key concepts of sports, games and play, have to a clear extent declined. Of much greater prevalence in the contemporary literature has been the development of substantive axiological issues ranging from social and political philosophy of sport to the rapidly growing field of ethics of sport.

Philosophers have been clear about the need to throw off the cloak of apparent neutrality of analytical philosophy in favour of arguing for substantive positions in terms of the “co modification” of sports, their “commercialisation”, and their corruption”. The development of substantive normative positions has proceeded in addition - rather than in opposition- to the careful articulation of precisely what those concepts logically entail. If these debates have also raged in the social scientific literatures then it is clear that academics in this portion of the philosophy of sport have made their own important contributions, premised on a clear understanding of the potentially diverse conceptualizations of sport. Similarly, in ethics, philosophers of sport have attempted to argue for the aptness of different moral philosophical theories to capture sports’ nature and the nature of sporting actions therein. In these fields, philosophers have generated new ideas about the contested nature of sports ethics itself – whether as contract, or duty/obligation, or utility, or virtue. And in doing so they have often connected with the empirical research of other bodies of knowledge that would have been unimaginable to the “ordinary language philosophers’ who saw themselves neutrally dissecting the linguistic usage of others through much of the previous fifty years.

Conclusion

The diversity of practices that fall within the compass of the different schools and traditions of philosophy means that there is not a universal method to characterise the philosophy of sport. It is impossible therefore to state unequivocally what relations hold between philosophising and practice. While there will always be a portion of philosophical scholarship in sport that is more abstract (whether in the analytical, continental or eastern traditions), there is a growth of more applied work in the fields of axiology. Increasingly, philosophers are making contributions to national and international sports policy development, along with pressure groups, where the need for the knowledge and skills of argumentation philosophers characteristically bring to bear on challenging normative issues is clear. Examples of such applied work include research into diverse conceptions of equity in operation with respect to categories such as gender and race; arbitrating between proper and improper means of performance enhancement and genetic engineering; illuminating the fascistic tendencies of elite sports or the xenophobia of modern sporting nationalism. Many of these issues would have been unthinkable to philosophers fifty years ago but

are increasingly becoming part of the standard work of philosophers of sport.

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