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“Sports and the Good Life: The Meaning of Athletic Competition”

I) Two Approaches to Appreciating Sport

Practically no one would deny that sports possess some kind of meaning, insofar as they play an important role in the lives of many individuals, and virtually all societies. But there are different avenues to understanding this observation. I want to distinguish two: First, we could measure the importance of sports empirically—for instance, in terms of the investment of time, or money, or sheer emotion—and the findings would surely be impressive. Indeed, even an unsympathetic observer would have to be impressed, if not alarmed, by the story the numbers would tell about our cultural and personal estimation of sport. And there may well be reason for some alarm, especially when we contrast the emphasis placed on sports with that placed on other cultural and personal values. The second way to appreciate sports—the way I want to approach them—is to consider them philosophically, that is to say, from an inside perspective. Here the attempt is to understand the nature of sports as such, the particular excellences that pertain and how these might compare to other human excellences, and the meaning of the endeavor. Whereas an empirical, or sociological, study tells us *that* sports matter, a philosophical study attempts to tell us *why*. This will be my approach: I want to argue, in a manner reminiscent of a famous Socratic distinction, that sports is meaningful not because so many people engage in it and take it seriously, but rather that so many people engage in it because it is inherently meaningful.

II) Three Senses of The Meaningfulness of Sport

As I begin to make my argument, I distinguish three senses of ‘meaning’ that people often ascribe to sports. All three senses, in my opinion, are valid and relevant, but I think we can identify a certain ordering among them.

First, sports can be considered meaningful in a sense analogous to the way the arts are considered meaningful: both are fundamental, characteristically human, and for some, significantly defining of the self. Both types of endeavor engage the whole person, and not merely a part, such as the animal powers; both are irreducibly valuable regardless of any indirect benefits and even despite some undesirable side effects. For example, just as one would under-appreciate music if one were to consider it valuable because of its ability to discipline a student's mind, or to relax a tired worker after a day at the office, one would similarly misunderstand sports were one to consider them important because they provide excellent outlets for aggression, or because they teach teamwork or persistence. People who care about sports think of them as inherently valuable, as instantiations of the good life. In fact, it is not unusual to hear people speak seriously about loving a particular sport, or having respect for it, or acting—usually in some official capacity—to protect its integrity.

A second way to think about the meaning of sports is to regard them as surrogates for other, perhaps more basic, human needs or expressions. These needs or expressions might be either the noblest aspirations, or the most basic drives of our human nature, but in either case, according to this view, sports are intelligible as stand-ins for something else. For example, in a recent book, Michael Mandelbaum refers to sport as “a variety of religious experience” because he observes striking psychological and behavioral resemblances between the respective devotees of religion and sport (Mandelbaum, M. *The Meaning of Sports*, pp. 1-39). Mandelbaum surmises that, for some, modern sports provide satisfactions that were previously furnished by organized religion. For example, both religion and sport stands as diversions from our basic work routines, both provide strong occasions for inclusions in a community, and both identify heroic figures worthy of our respect and emulation. Of course, the sports as surrogate interpretation can go in the other direction: there are many who think of sports as a relatively harmless domestication of our essentially antisocial or aggressive natures, a point underscored by the shared

vocabularies of warfare and sport. Some of these theorists emphasize the cathartic power of competitive sports, while others express the fear that sports actually aggravate social problems.

The third way is to think of sports—particularly sports that are organized as competitive games or events—as meaningful in roughly the same way that language is meaningful. This analogy might seem implausible at first, but I think it is an obvious implication of Wittgenstein’s famous doctrine of “language games” (*Sprachspiele*). Wittgenstein asserts that one learns how speak a language (or use a language, or participate in a language) in basically the same way one learns how to play a game (Wittgenstein, L. *Philosophical Investigations*, section 7). There are, in both, various moves that are allowed and/or appropriate at certain times in the game; failure to abide by these conventions is not so much wrong as it is unintelligible to the other participants. I suggest that the analogy is doubling revealing: just as it is helpful to think of language acquisition and understanding as similar to participation in a game, with it regulated moves and predictable responses, it is worthwhile to consider how a competitive engagement represents a kind of communication, or inter-subjective achievement. In fact, there is something of a circularity in Wittgenstein’s semantic theory because the concept of ‘meaning’ is revealed by reference to ‘use’ precisely because, and only because, we already intuit that a coordinated practice, especially as exemplified in games, is inherently meaningful.

Of the three senses of sport’s meaningfulness—sports as *self-defining*, sports as *surrogate*, and sports as *semantic*—I want to suggest that the third sense is the most fundamental sense, and in fact explains the other two. In order to make this point, I need to develop more fully my understanding of what I consider to be the animating principle of sports, which is the competitive engagement that structures the encounter. There is some question about non-competitive sports but I will address that later.

III) Athletic Competition as Relationship

I start by distinguishing the competitive relationship against two foils: competitive athletes confront one another within the event neither as friends nor as enemies. Both friendship and enmity are relatively simple phenomena. In the former one seeks the good of the friend as one's own; in the latter, the intention is to suppress or to destroy.

Competitors are not friends because they devote their energies to the objective of outdoing and even frustrating the efforts of their opponent—the more efficiently and mercilessly the better. A competitor searches for the opponents' weak spots and tries to exploit them. A tennis player, for example, might consistently hit the ball to her opponent's weaker side; she might vary the placements of her shots in an effort to tire her opponent; and she might even feign confidence or energy in an effort to discourage or intimidate. Indeed, an important element in all interactive competitions—basketball and soccer are prime examples in the athletic realm—is misdirection or deceit: a player pretends that she is going to run to the right and then suddenly she runs to the left. These are not friendly gestures. To make matters even worse, when a competitor senses self-doubt, confusion, or despair in the opponent, she pounces on it; it gives her a surge of energy and a sense of opportunity.

But here we observe an interesting paradox: even though the competitor does everything he or she can (again, within the rules of the event) to frustrate and defeat the opponent, the competitor needs, and on some level, wants the opponent to withstand those efforts and to respond to them successfully, at least to some extent. If, for example, the tennis player looks across the net and sees that her opponent has succumbed to those negative feelings that I described, she is, on another level, disappointed because the activity that both players sought out is thereby terminated or at least compromised.

It is important to make clear that I present this not as a psychological study, but rather as a metaphysical analysis of the nature of a competitive engagement. As a competitor, my conscious intention is always simply to defeat the opponent; I will let the opponent worry about sustaining the engagement. Indeed, any competitor who consciously roots for his/her opponent to do well is worse than silly. This kind of misplaced sportsmanship actually compromises the integrity of the event, and deeply insults the opponent (the worst feeling is sports is not the experience of getting beaten badly, but the recognition that one's opponent is taking pity on you and letting you score some points). The greater compliment from the opponent is the all-out effort, because it indicates a level of trust and respect.

But competitors are not enemies either, because they provide something important otherwise not available. What I am suggesting here is that, by its very nature, there is a limit to what benevolence can offer in human interactions. If, for example, I desire to be a champion tennis player, none of the people who love me and support me in this quest—my family and friends, my coach, my practice partner—none of them, strictly speaking, can make me a champion; only my opponent, who is, with all of his energies, trying prevent me from being a champion, can give me an opportunity for this. Another way to put the point: I am trying to prove to myself and to others that I am a winner, and the only way I can do this is by entering into a relationship with someone who is trying to make me a loser. The worth of the victor's achievement is a function of, and precisely limited by, the excellence of the opponent. Nietzsche says something that comes close to my point here: "You may have only enemies whom you hate, not enemies you despise. You must be proud of your enemy; then the successes of your enemy are your successes too." (Nietzsche, F. *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, section I, 10)

This gives rise to a second paradox of competition: I enter into a competition striving for victory, trying to prove that I am a winner, but precisely at the moment that I become a winner, my opponent has become, by definition, a loser—and in principle this nullifies the prestige of my victory. My opponent disappoints me when

this occurs, because our activity is now terminated or made impossible. Competition is a kind of relationship made better, more authentic, and more intimate the more intense and sustained the exchange; in principle, it is always the loser who terminates this relationship, which I think is the implicit shame of defeat. In good competitions, as we know, there is a prolonged exchange: the advantages go back and forth, the competitors recover from near-defeat, and they progressively construct something truly noble and in its own way beautiful.

I find a nearly perfect description of the paradoxes of competition in Hegel, particularly in the “Master and Slave” section of his *Phenomenology of Mind*. I want to outline that discussion here, in plain language, and in particular I want to contrast his discussion of human struggle with that of Thomas Hobbes’ discussion because I think they represent the two basic models of this primordial stance.

IV) Two Understandings of Human Conflict: Hobbes and Hegel

First, as most of you know, Hobbes famously presents the natural state of humankind as a universal war of all against all, a zero-sum struggle over scarce goods, including glory. In *Leviathan* he asserts:

So that in the first place, I put for a generall inclination of all mankind, a perpetuall and restlesse desire of power after power, that ceaseth only in Death. (Hobbes, T. *Leviathan*, chapter XI)

The conflict Hobbes describes takes place between fully formed individuals, and because the quintessential Hobbesian value is physical survival, all conflicts should be understood in material terms. That is to say, there is no meaning, development, or inherent value to the struggle; nor is there any possibility of an internal resolution. It would be better for the Hobbesian combatant if the opponent were not even there, and the war between them ends only because of the development of the *Leviathan*, the over-awing power that scares the combatants into obedience and peace.

For Hegel, on the other hand, the basic struggle is about something beyond the material realm, namely, recognition (*Anerkennen*). In Hegel’s view, it is a

necessary stage in the development of self-consciousness that the self transforms what was formerly only a subjective self-certainty into an objective truth, and this can occur only through the recognition provided by another self-consciousness which is, necessarily, engaged in the same pursuit. What this means, quite simply, is that I cannot quite know what I am until someone whose opinion matters recognizes me. I have to prove myself.

Self-consciousness exists in and for itself when, and by the fact that, it so exists for another; that is, it exists only in being acknowledged. (Hegel, G. *Phenomenology of Spirit*, section 178)

Now when I go out seeking this recognition, I encounter an other who is also seeking recognition for himself or herself: nobody is simply waiting there to provide a service, and if one were, recognition from such a being would be worthless. Therefore, two self-consciousnesses (or spirits) confront one another, each seeking recognition while refusing to grant it to the other. This creates, according to Hegel, a “life and death struggle” which ends only when one self-consciousness (or spirit) relinquishes his claim because he cannot or will not risk his life.

The individual who has not risked his life may well be recognized as a *person*, but he has not attained to the truth of this recognition as an independent self-consciousness. (Hegel, G. *Phenomenology of Spirit*, section 187)

Thus arises the relation of “Master and Slave,” which Hegel depicts as a temporary and mutually dissatisfying stage because the slave is forced to recognize the master through his work, and the master fails to find an adequate other to provide recognition of himself. This stage will be overcome as the Slave finds dignity in the work he is forced to do, and will soon rise up against the Master seeking his own recognition. With his new-found strength and sense of self, the former slave is able to trade places, as it were, with the former master, but the new ordering simply replicates the dissatisfactions and instability that characterized the original domination. This pattern of alternating dominations repeats itself in a dialectical escalation in much the same way that the best games or contests exhibit a back-and-forth tension.

Hegel understands conflict and struggle to be reciprocally constitutive of the self, and therefore inherently meaningful. In Hegel's view, the self desires more than anything else, more than life itself, to be esteemed by others, not so much as a matter of vanity but rather of ontology: I am precisely that which a resistant other is compelled to recognize. Accordingly, an antagonist must be regarded as a collaborator of some sort. It is important to note that the encounter between the antagonists is always *over* some "work" (*Arbeit*) but it is not *about* the work. Work simply provides the occasion or the material that supports the struggle, and could be variously understood as physical labor, the body, or, I would suggest, an athletic contest.

These two interpretations of human struggle imply very different understandings about the value and meaning of sport. The Hobbesian view must understand competitive sport as a controlled instance of the basic problematic of the human condition. According to his approach, any competitive engagement is valuable as a means to an end, whatever the scarce good might be, and therefore the opponent is a mere obstacle. The whole point of an athletic contest conceptualized in Hobbesian terms would be the goods attained after the victory. In the Hegelian version, on the other hand, the struggle is something of an end-in-itself because it is *through* this encounter, indeed, *in* this encounter that the self realizes its full being. The opponent is not only necessary, but, indeed, the very thing that presents the possibility for the self's full realization, and determines the value of that achievement. Here, the whole point of the encounter is the encounter itself, in its pure, coordinated, and reciprocal character.

V) Competition, Social Institutions, and Meaning

All human confrontations can be understood as struggles over some "work" or some third thing. Hegel's master-slave dialectic suggests that such encounters are never just brute conflicts in the material world; they are, rather, moments in the progressive realization of the human spirit. I think of all such engagements as modes of competition, using the term 'competition' in a broad sense; furthermore, I

would conceptualize all these modes on a spectrum of meaning and value, which are inversely related.

Let me start with the two extremes. At one end of the spectrum, we have war, which is a zero sum confrontation over the most basic natural values, such as life and land. In warfare, one seeks to annihilate the other, the confrontation has no inherent importance, and therefore there is nothing constitutive or meaningful in the engagement. Strictly speaking, therefore, war is not really on the competitive spectrum but rather should be understood as a border case, distinguishable against competitive engagements. At the other end of the spectrum, athletic competition derives its great meaning precisely because of the devaluation of the work over which the competitors struggle. Nothing is at stake except for recognition. There is, for example, no natural value in hitting a tennis ball over a net consistently, or in kicking an inflated ball into a goal, or even in running a hundred meters a fraction of a second faster than others. To use John Searle's terms, athletic events typically devise constitutive rules that essentially create an activity; they do so in order to thematize the struggle itself, and therefore to allow for the athletic relationship. Perhaps this point is hard to see, because athletic success has always been so obscenely rewarded, and never more so than today (even Socrates had something to say about that: see Plato, *Apology*, 36d-e). But athletics is not about external values; in fact, they are almost always a corrupting influence.

The other competitive modes occupy a middle place on the spectrum; they are both valuable (insofar as they are not merely games) and meaningful (insofar as they are structured as competitions). There are natural values at stake in the institutional competitions, such as justice, political authority, and market shares, but these engagements have been made more meaningful and human insofar as they have been formalized and ritualized. The participants have come to accept common procedures for the resolution of the inevitable conflicts that these values create; the manner in which we resolve these conflicts has become as important as the resolution itself. In other words, what were formerly causes for war have become something like sports. Litigation is serious business, but lawyers adopt something of

the attitude and stance of competitive athletes towards one another. To use the distinction I suggested earlier, lawyers are engaged in an institutional activity that intends the promotion of justice, but psychologically they often focus simply on victory. The same is true, at least in principle, in democratic politics, market capitalism, and even academics. Plato, for instance, for all of his distrust of clever sophists once remarked that they are like “athletes with words.” (Plato, Sophist 231d-e) If we recall the great traditions of the medieval disputed questions, or observe the argumentative structure of Thomas Aquinas’ *Summa Theologiae*, we see the constructive value of genuine intellectual combat. In all these modes, the competitors share an intimate and respectful relationship, even while, and precisely because, they try to defeat the other. We find out much of who we are, what we know, and what is right, through the marketplace of ideas, which is a competitive forum.

Some of the key developments of our time— democratization, globalization, and privatization—are all intelligible as movements toward a more competitive world. Competitive structures are replacing older, more authoritarian structures because the non-competitive evaluations are prone to prejudice, intransigence, and lack of respect for individual autonomy. An increased appreciation of our fallibility, of our cultural differences, and of the constructive merit of dialectical exchange have persuaded many, to put it bluntly, to simply let contenders “fight it out” according to accepted rules in order to determine what is best or proper or true. Competitive systems are justified not only instrumentally, in that they are (we hope) maximally productive of desirable outcomes, but also intrinsically because they are themselves instantiations of certain values such as respect, fairness, and dignity.

I want to be careful not to overstate the point: Competition is not the whole of life, and it is not an unqualified good. We all do and we all should seek out satisfactions other than the thrill of victory—satisfactions such as knowledge, health, charity, and serenity, to name a few. We will always need human sympathy,

generosity, and unselfishness. We should be suspicious, therefore, of any theory of human nature that attempts to reduce all expressions and all activities to one basic root. Nevertheless, it seems to me that a full understanding of the human condition cannot fail to assign an indispensable role to competition and competitiveness. If this is true, and to the extent that competition is appropriate and constructive, we should regard it not as the basic problematic of the human condition, but rather as an ideal to be maximally implemented.

I return now to my original theme, which is the Place of Sports in society. How do we regard athletes and what importance should we place on their endeavors as compared to the endeavors of serious folk? On the one hand it is easy to see that the competitions of law and politics are more important than athletic competitions (although not more seriously undertaken). It is for this reason that many regard athletic competition as a diversion from, or a preparation for, the real struggles of life. But, in my view, it is precisely the other way around: the reason we acknowledge the superiority of competitive institutions, the so-called “real world” competitions, is because they approximate the pure activity that engages athletes.

Athletic competition is “pure” in the sense that the encounter is intelligible simply as a relational dynamic, which has purposely minimized, if not eliminated altogether, its utilitarian value. It is a leisure activity and, as Aristotle reminds us, “we are un-leisurely in order to be leisurely.” (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1177b 4-6) In principle at least, even though the real-world engagements might be more urgent, they are less important than the activities that they allow for. Another lesson from Aristotle is relevant: it is impossible, he tells us, to experience the pleasures of a just man without being just, or the pleasures of a musician without being musical. (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1175b 35-38) Similarly it is impossible to know the pleasure of being a competitive athlete without competing. For athletes, in other words, competition is not merely a diversion or a means to an end; it is itself an instantiation of the good life.

Alastair MacIntyre argues that every culture promotes some character types in whose personas we find a concentration of representative virtues. He identifies the courtier as a medieval type, reflecting a hierarchical society in which service and obeisance become instinctual; and the therapist as a contemporary type, treating all failures as diseases passively suffered rather than choices consciously made.

(MacIntyre, A. *After Virtue*, chapter 3) Along this line of thinking, I would suggest the athlete as a representative type, in fact, quite plausibly the central one. Think of any athletic champion—what characteristics come to mind? Hardness, focus, confidence, a respect for rules (without unnecessary moralism), endurance, poise, intelligence (without unnecessary introspection), and, above all, an ability to keep one’s eye on the ball. In our world, athletic virtues are surest guarantors of success, respect, and happiness.

VI) Three Objections

I conclude by addressing a few obvious objections:

1) *What about those individuals who are too competitive?* Properly understood, competitiveness is a virtue and by definition one cannot have too much of a virtue. The important factor here is the fact that one’s competitive activity is strictly constrained by rules: within the rules of the competitive event, one’s activity and energy manifests itself as extreme focus, persistence, and courage. Again, we can take a lesson from Aristotle. One cannot, he tells us, have too much courage, although it is possible to have too little fear (the vice of recklessness). This answer, admittedly, sounds a bit too neat, because we all recognize the point of the original complaint. That is, we have all seen people who misbehave or throw temper tantrums during games, or to give another example, we hear of those who try to outdo others in every conceivable aspect of their lives, such as the size of their boats or the extravagance of their parties. Such behavior is indeed worthy of condemnation, but it is misleading, in my opinion, to identify the problem in terms of “competitiveness.” We have old fashioned terms for those displays—avarice,

vanity, immaturity, intemperance, envy—and it would be better to remain with them.

2) *Does meaningfulness in sport require competition?* The premise of my argument has been that sports gain their meaning through the competitive engagement, which implies that noncompetitive sports and athletic endeavors are meaningless. But this stance seems overly restrictive, prejudicial, and even arrogant. Why does one have to intend to *defeat* another to gain meaning? In response I would remind the reader that I am deliberately using the term ‘meaning’ in a specific sense, and not as a summation of all possible virtues. No one could deny the many good things about noncompetitive sports: they build health, they are often beautiful, they provide pleasure and entertainment, their physical demands carry both risks and rewards, and they have some educational significance, even if people debate about exactly what it is. All of these aspects are important, and many are unquestionably positive. But meaning is special and, in my view, represents the chief virtue of sport. Although noncompetitive sport possess and promote many values, something very important is added when the exercise of one’s skills and capacities are put to the test against a resistant other. In fact, all of the other positives are reshaped and revitalized when done in a competitive context. Now they become aspects of an interpersonal engagement; they are realized through the constitutive activity of the other.

3) *Does competition require otherness?* Doesn’t one compete against oneself when, for example, a runner seeks to better his or her previous times on the daily route? Isn’t the competitive challenge always a matter of forcing oneself to go beyond one’s *own* presumed limits? While there is some plausibility to this objection, I think the idea that one can compete against oneself faces something like the private language objection made by Wittgenstein. That is, no matter how hard I push myself, no matter how scrupulous I am in recording my scores and times, I cannot be sure if I challenge myself as much as an opponent would. I cannot be sure if I can perform under pressure, because this is a condition I cannot simulate by myself. I cannot even be sure if I am following the same rules that define the sport

because, as Wittgenstein suggests, suggests rules are interpersonal, behavioral phenomena, and not concepts in the mind. (Wittgenstein, L. *Philosophical Investigations*, section 154) At the most fundamental level, this objection raises a question about the ontology of personhood. The thesis I have been exploring takes the position that there is no real self, in any adequate understanding of the word, prior to relationship or engagement. Competitive sport therefore represents an exemplary instance of the basic human need for meaningful encounters with others.