Teaching the Philosophy of Sport

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To some philosophers putting the philosophy of sport into a college curriculum would seem an abdication of serious philosophy to the demands of maintaining student enrollment through insubstantial "pop" courses. Others may see it as a sometimes useful means of stimulating serious thought and developing reasoning skills in undergraduates who otherwise would be less exposed to these. After teaching the course for a year, and while granting that much depends upon specifics, I have come to hold the latter view.

There is an *ad hominem* argument against my claim lurking in the background that should be mentioned: one would expect someone who teaches a "pop" course to defend it rather than admit its intellectual worthlessness. (In psychology this is known as "reducing one's cognitive dissonance," in common parlance "sweet lemons.") The best reply to this objection is to note that since a belief can be both true and comforting to the believer, the only sure path is to examine what justification can be given for it.

I believe that substantial justification can be given. If I am correct, it is a good thing, because new courses typically face what strikes me as an unwarranted burden-of-proof objection to their inception. "We all know what philosophy is," it will be said. "It is the subject written about by Aristotle, Kant, Hegel, Heidegger, and Wittgenstein. There are, to be sure, 'philosophy of ________' areas, such as science, language, and education, which are newer arrivals, but these areas are recognized as important branches of philosophy. Additions to college curricula must at least *belong* to the discipline of the teaching department, and to the extent that the philosophy of sport has only dubious claim to membership in the discipline, this must count against offering courses in it. Moreover, a sensible conservativism demands that we not offer 'unknown commodities' gratuitously. A genuine need or high degree of desirability must be clearly demonstrated before new courses are adopted."

Although such burden-of-proof conservativism is quite common, I doubt that it is sound. From the standpoint of maximizing student intellectual growth, the conservative approach can be justified only if it contributes to the educational experience in some not-too-distant future. If it seems likely that a new course would contribute more to intellectual growth (which in philosophy I take to be the development of critical reasoning skills) than an existing course, then

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this is a strong *prima facie* reason for replacing that course, at least temporarily. The fact that a course is new or peripheral should not count against it *per se*, but only insofar as these qualities can be rationally predicted to count against its educational success.

Even if one accepts this consequentialist position on curricula composition, one may doubt whether student intellectual growth should be the sole consequence considered. Other consequences, such as faculty happiness, might be counted in the estimation. Suppose it is reasonable to believe that by replacing one section of a traditional introductory course with a section of Philosophy of Sport a minimally improved educational package would result. Suppose also that the instructor who will teach this course, although competent and willing to serve, *loathes* it—that it makes the entire semester a misery for the instructor. Here we may acknowledge that beyond mere expediencies, there may be a legitimate moral argument against offering the new addition.

This case is idealized. Typically the negative consequences of providing Philosophy of Sport will be more imagined than real. Working up a new course involves more work than is involved in teaching a familiar one, but this is the instructor's job. One's colleagues will make jokes, but it is doubtful whether the department as a whole will lose 'prestige.' The administration may ask, what-are-you-folks-*doing*-down-there?, but the department will have an adequate answer: teaching. The department that takes the teaching of undergraduate non-majors seriously will look past these parochial concerns and make the course decision on the basis of educational productivity.

A large part of educational productivity is gearing our course offerings to our students. There is no such thing as a good or excellent course *per se*, irrespective of students' ability to gain from the course. The old-fashioned concept of college as primarily non-vocational, liberal arts training for children of the rich has not been entertained since at least the Second World War. Sadly, the 'love of learning' ethic seems to have taken a beating since even the 60s, understandably given the economic woes and decline of quality of life faced by Americans. SAT scores are reaching rock bottom, many college students do not read at traditional senior high school levels, and most seem to have had almost no experience in writing.

Philosophy, the least high school-like of all college disciplines, must take special notice. While some students at some schools will benefit most from difficult traditional texts (e.g., Copi's *Symbolic Logic*, Cornman and Lehrer's *Philosophical Problems and Arguments*), philosophy departments need to offer a range of courses that will be optimally productive for the entire spectrum of students at their schools. The adoption of non-traditional courses is not an abdication of serious philosophy provided that students are more stimulated to think hard than they are in traditional courses, where the despair at being overmatched by incomprehensible material can permeate a classroom. As philosophers we are perhaps foremost interested in issues, but as teachers our greatest concern should be with *activities*, viz., the intensity of the thought processes of our students. Special gearing may include some aberrant courses, in

medical or business ethics, in love and sex, in drugs and mysticism, or, depending upon student interest, in philosophy of sport.

Philosophy of Sport has clear advantages as an introduction to philosophical reasoning for many undergraduates who take philosophy courses to satisfy "area" requirements enroute to B.A.'s in non-liberal arts fields. In my experience students in this category are not typically interested in philosophy *per se* or, for that matter, other purely academic pursuits. The rare great teacher of philosophy may be able to stimulate some interest in Plato, Kant, or epistemological skepticism, but most of us are not great teachers and need all the help we can get.

Philosophy of Sport can help. Perhaps the greatest protest of non-majors filling area requirements with introductory philosophy courses is over the abstractness of the discipline. Interactionism vs. epiphenomenalism, hard vs. soft determinism, consequentialism vs. formalism are distinctions that often prompt *ennui* and contempt instead of enlightenment. Many students need a gradual and palatable route to philosophical problems, and this has several facets. An obvious *desideratum* is that the course begin with and maintain a workable level of interest. Most students who enroll in my Philosophy of Sport course are athletes at the intercollegiate, intramural, or school-yard level. The initial interest level is comparable to that of nursing or pre-med students who fill their philosophy area requirement in Medical Ethics rather than Introduction to Philosophy. The initial interest level is higher than that of comparable students in my Introduction to Philosophy sections, and represents what I consider a gift that I try not to squander.

One should not minimize the importance of approaching forbidding subject-matter from familiar ground. As discouraging as it may be to philosophers, many eighteen-year-olds in our colleges have done more theoretical thinking about sports (e.g., Is it right for a coach to lie to a player to get superior performance? Must professional football necessarily be violent? Should the Olympics be used as part of foreign policy?) than about God, immortality, and freedom of the will. Theoretical thinking is cumulative, and it helps if the student has already embarked on it before coming to the philosophy classroom.[1]

Another benefit is that if the course is successful, students will tend to view philosophy as more continuous with the rest of their budding intellectual concerns than they typically would had they taken a systematic or historical introductory course. I personally find few things more discouraging than to hear a student describe an introduction to philosophy course in this familiar way: "Oh, yeah, the teacher talked about Pluto, and John Stuart Mills, and the brain-body problem, but it was so far out that I didn't get too much from it." Philosophy's distance from the rest of undergraduate education is in part a function of its perceived distance (a sort of *esse est percipi*) and Philosophy of Sport can reduce the latter.

What is the philosophy of sport? Many know that Paul Weiss wrote a book on it[2] and that there is a journal of that name.[3] Weiss's book and most of

the articles in the journal see sport as an important though philosophically uncharted aspect of human experience, treating it as a new area for conceptual and phenomenological work. The literature in these areas is growing.[4]

My own approach is to relate topics in sport to standard problems of philosophy, especially value theory. Much of the course can be viewed as applied ethics similar to medical and business ethics courses. Fairly straightforward connections can also be drawn between sport and the issues of free-will and determinism, the metaphysical nature of persons, whether there exists human nature, and conceptions of "the good life."

I have built my course around two multi-purpose anthologies, *Sport and the Body* by Ellen Gerber[5] and *The Philosophy of Sport* by Robert Osterhoudt.[6] Both contain substantial sections on conceptual, phenomenological, and even aesthetic dimensions of sport in addition to ethical applications. Handouts from Hobbes' *Leviathan* and Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* bring the total reading load to about fifteen short selections.

A major theme that I consider is the connection between competitiveness in sport and the nature of persons. Articles by physical educators and philosophers are read which severally praise, condemn, or accept as inevitable high competitiveness in sport. This takes us to Hobbes' picture of humanity in the state of nature and his philosophical explanation of the condition. This, in turn, leads us to contrast to Hobbes' view the dualistic, free-will image of persons.

Along the way the following questions are considered. Is competitiveness best viewed as a form of aggression? How much does competitive behavior reveal about the nature of the competitor? Is aggression an unavoidable aspect of human nature that requires release in some form for the health of the organism (as in Nietzsche[7] and James[8])? Are the existentialists correct when they deny that there is such a thing as human nature? (This question yields a discussion of the difference between *a priori* and *a posteriori* reasoning!) Why is a high degree of competitiveness displayed in some societies, but not others? Does this anthropological variation refute Hobbes' deterministic materialism that holds that wherever two persons believe that they have an equal chance at some good they will become foes?[9] How reasonable is the dualistic claim that an immaterial mind stands outside the physiological web of causation and permits actions that are not necessitated by physiological causes? Is competition a good thing in economics and social life in general, and how close are the parallels between competition here and in athletics?[10]

(A pedogogical advantage to approaching the nature of persons issues through competition is that contrasting views are seen not as parts of a merely academic debate, but as *explanatory* hypotheses for observed phenomena. This appeals to students' native scientific curiosity, one which is usually much stronger than pure philosophical curiosity.)

Sportsmanship serves as our entry route to normative ethics. A parallel is drawn between displaying sportsmanship (defined as mitigating one's effort to win out of other-regarding reasons) and adopting the moral point of view in

life. Various justifications of each are considered: enlightened self-interest, logical consistency, and species of moralizing. One of the physical educators read draws an interesting comparison between, on the one hand, merely obeying the rules in sports and displaying sportsmanship and, on the other, merely obeying the letter of the law in everyday life and adopting the moral point of view.[11] The distinction between consequentialism and formalism is broached by examining arguments in favor of (and even against)[12] sportsmanship on consequentialist and formalist grounds.

The sportsmanship topic leads to some questions in the social sciences. Does training in sport affect one's sense of "fair play"? Does adopting sportsmanship tend to make competitions "positive" rather than "zero sum-games" in terms of total pleasure derived? What factors are responsible for the much lamented decline of sportsmanship in many areas? What are the affects of winning and losing on one's personality? Here I compare one author's claim that being a loser so often before becoming President made Abraham Lincoln a more sympathetic person[13] and Wilt Chamberlain's claim that he "grew" more in losing than Bill Russell did in his many years of victories.[14]

Other topics in normative ethics are covered. The Gerber volume contains a speech by Josiah Royce to a group of physical educators in 1908 where he argues that athletics contribute to developing those individually necessary and conjointly sufficient moral virtues, loyalty and loyalty to loyalty.[15] A Catholic Priest produces a religious argument against professional boxing which likens that sport to other condemned "victimless crimes."[16] In an excerpt from *The Principles of Ethics*, Herbert Spencer applies the "lessons of evolution" to sport, providing us with an opportunity to examine the strength of naturalistic inferences.

A related value theme is "the good life" or, less pretentiously, the question of what sort of activities are intrinsically worthwhile. We begin by reading a short excerpt from B. J. Digg's "Rules and Utilitarianism"[17] where the distinction between instrumental and game rules is discussed. Armed with this distinction we read "The Grasshopper" by Bernard Suits,[18] who claims that the playing of games (defined as the voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles) represents the intrinsic good for persons. Finally, we contrast this view with Aristotle's argument in the *Nicomachean Ethics* that the highest end of human activity is rational thinking.

This progression leads to these lines of discussion. Suits' pluralistic and subjective idea of the *summum bonum* is compared to Aristotle's species-wide notion. Since Suits provides one version of Utopia, the class is challenged to criticize his and to construct their own. The Grasshopper's fear that his idea of Utopia may be paradoxical provides a cue to the discussion of paradox in language and in the omnipotence of God.

Admittedly, not every issue considered in the course is philosophical in the strictest sense. Most are, and the rest are philosophical in that they are somewhat speculative, involve deep-rooted questions regarding persons, and are intellectually interesting. Addressing all these questions requires not merely

reciting the familiar repertoire of positions involving mind-body, free-will, etc., but some rudimentary knowledge of psychology, biology, economics, and empirical information about sport. One does not typically know that much about all these areas, but if you have something worthwhile to say, students do not (and should not) hold it against you.

Although issues from other disciplines are discussed, the philosophical core of the course ensures that someone trained in philosophy will typically do a better job with this sort of course than specialists in other disciplines, even physical education or coaching. A vast knowledge of sport is not required, not much more than knowing the difference between a KO and a TKO in boxing, that many professionals compete in the Olympics, and that women's athletics has burgeoned in the last five years. The increased influence of sport on American life is evidenced by the fact that it would be a rare philosophy department (that bastion of unworldly aloofness) that does not have one or more members knowledgable enough about sport to handle the sort of course described above.

Depending on student circumstances, perhaps relatively few departments would produce a better educational product by offering Philosophy of Sport. But probably some would. Philosophy of Sport is a real course, has certain educational advantages over traditional courses, and deserves consideration.[19]

Notes

1. Compare with J. Dewey, "Thinking in Education," from *Democracy and Education*, reprinted in M. Lipman and A. Sharp, editors, *Growing Up With Philosophy*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1978, p. 50: "the essentials of (instructional) method are...identical with the essentials of reflection...that the pupil have a genuine situation of experience—that there be a continuous activity in which he is interested for its own sake...that a genuine problem develop within this situation as a stimulus to thought...."

2. P. Weiss, *Sport, A Philosophical Inquiry*, Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1969.

3. *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport*, University of Western Ontario.

4. There are lengthy bibliographies in E. Gerber, ed., *Sport and the Body: A Philosophical Symposium*, Philadelphia: Lea and Febiger, 1978, and in R. Osterhoudt, ed., *The Philosophy of Sport*, Springfield: Charles C. Thomas, 1973.

5. Gerber, *Sport and the Body*.

6. Osterhoudt, *The Philosophy of Sport*.

7. F. Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, New York: Random House, 1967.

8. W. James, "The Moral Equivalent of War," in *Essays on Faith and Morals*, New York: World Publishing Company, 1962, pp. 311-328.

9. This suggestion is made by W. Sadler in "A Contextual Approach to an Understanding of Competition" in Osterhoudt, *The Philosophy of Sport*, pp. 176-191.

10. Two differing views on this are expressed by J. Keating in "The Ethics of Competition," and R. Osterhoudt in "On Keating on the Competitive Motif in Athletics

and Playful Activity," both in Osterhoudt, *The Philosophy of Sport*, pp. 157-176 and 192-197.

11. D. Oberteuffer, "On Learning Values Through Sport," in Gerber, *Sport and the Body*, pp. 251-254.

12. S. Brock, "Sport and Value," unpublished paper, Department of Philosophy, East Carolina University.

13. G. Turbeville, "On Being Good Sports in Sports," in Gerber, *Sport and the Body*, pp. 255-259.

14. W. Chamberlain, *Wilt: Just Like Any Other 7-Foot Black Millionaire Who Lives Next Door*, New York: Warner, 1973.

15. "Physical Training and Moral Education," in Gerber, *Sport and the Body*, pp. 247-250.

16. R. McCormick, "Is Professional Boxing Immoral?" in Gerber, *Sport and the Body*, pp. 271-276.

17. In Gerber, *Sport and the Body*, pp. 289-292.

18. In Osterhoudt, *Philosophy of Sport*, pp. 198-219.

19. I am grateful to James LeRoy Smith for helpful comments on an earlier draft of the paper.

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Published quarterly by Universitetsforlaget, P.O. Box 2959 Tøyen, Oslo 6, Norway – P.O. Box 258, Irvington-on-Hudson, New York 10533, USA.