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# Hermeneutics and Sport

## Introduction

For formalists, a sport is constituted by its rules. As such, the sport may be seen as a self-enclosed, and indeed hermetic, world. While the behaviour of the competitors may make sense in terms of those constitutive rules (so that, for example, the soccer player's touching of the ball with their hand is a foul; the American footballer carrying the ball over their opponent's line is a touch down, and so on) those movements do not refer to anything outside the sport. Indeed, the meaning of a particular physical movement can be radically different if performed within a game as opposed to outside it. A punch within a boxing match may be positively evaluated and a point scored. Outside, obviously enough, the same physical movement may be a deplorable act of violence. It is then not clear that there is any sense in which sport might have meaning, beyond the meanings that are internal to the sporting action itself. A sport, or a particular match, does not obviously seem to be *about* anything, or in any way reflect or comment upon the non-sporting world.

Within the philosophy of sport there is a long tradition of challenging this formalist conclusion, perhaps reflecting the intuition that sport must have an importance beyond being 'mere' play or relaxation. Sport seems to say something about the human condition. The development of a hermeneutics of sport is one way of explicating this intuition, and as such, for unfolding how a seemingly formal set of rules might be read, not merely syntactically, but also semantically (Edgar 2013, 140-167).

Hermeneutics is the theory of how texts are interpreted and meaning derived from them. As a discipline, hermeneutics emerges in the theologians' concerns with the correct interpretation of scripture, and also with the identification of corrupt and inauthentic texts. Within a more secular tradition, Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834) is typically accredited as the first theorist of hermeneutics, articulating a number of its key tenets. Schleiermacher saw the process of interpretation in terms of what is known as the 'hermeneutic circle'. The argument here is that, in order to understand a text, the reader must have certain preconceptions about what the text is and how it might proceed. One approaches, say, a novel with very different expectations than those with which one approaches a philosophy text, or the rule book for tennis. The sense of the whole is used to make sense of the particular words, sentences and passages that the reader encounters. Even within the text, the word makes sense in the context of the sentence, the sentence in the context of the paragraph, and so on. But these general overviews are

refined and modified by contact with the details of the text itself. The expectation of the unfolding meaning of a paragraph may be challenged by the final sentence, or a book by its last chapter. Having finished reading the text, the reader's sense of the whole is thus transformed. A second reading may be required, so that the original, naive, impressions of the meaning of an early passage are re-read in the light of the new sense of the meaning of the whole. Second readings will thus lead to further refinements in the reader's understanding of this particular text, or they may enrich their understanding of the genre as a whole. (The first readers of *Moby Dick* or *Ulysses* encountered novels very unlike any that they had previously read.) The hermeneutic circle thus never stops, as a partial or inaccurate sense of the whole is continually refined in the light of contact with new and surprising details, and the details are re-read in the light of an unfolding sense of the whole.

The hermeneutic circle was profoundly analysed in the twentieth century by Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900-2002) (1975). Given the importance of an initial sense of the whole, Gadamer argued that interpretation presupposed pre-judgements or 'prejudices'. This articulation is important, not least, in that it throws into question the assumption, prevalent in Enlightenment science, that knowledge is achievable in 'a view from nowhere', which is to say, from an unbiased and neutral context. The reader is, for Gadamer, always embedded in a cultural tradition, or horizon, and this at once limits and directs their reading, but also makes it possible. In the context of sport, this already begins to suggest that, even if a sport is formally constituted in terms of a set of rules, those rules are devised within a particular culture and are played by humans embedded in specific traditions. Elements of this culture will be drawn into the sport, and indeed, may be considered to be the very material out of which the sport is constructed. As Peter Heinegg (2003) has remarked: 'Sport is a separate universe with a fully articulated structure which is a comic imitation of the real one; an ersatz Creation with both design and purpose (wholly arbitrary, yet consistent)... Sport of necessity works with the raw materials of everyday life, its desires, energies, and obstacles, but it detoxifies them, renders them pleasurable'.

For Paul Ricoeur (1913-2005), the hermeneutic text need not be the written document presupposed by Schleiermacher. Any meaningful action is a text, and thus hermeneutics is a core tool of the social sciences, but one may add, a key competence of all members of society (1981). Prior to Ricoeur, Wilhelm Dilthey (1833–1911) had argued that the difference between a social science, such as history, and a natural science, was that the former sought to interpret the meaning of actions and events, while the latter

sought merely a causal explanation. The historian does not want to know what caused Caesar to cross the Rubicon, but rather what that simple action meant to him and to his political opponents. The consideration of hermeneutics as an everyday social skill is also important to understanding sport. The athlete will be in a continual process of interpreting their opponent's actions, finding old presuppositions challenged (as the opponent introduces new tactics, or plays less well than before) and new interpretations as to strategic and tactics continually undergoing reformulation and revision.

Prior to Ricoeur and Gadamer, and profoundly influential on both, lay the philosophy of Martin Heidegger (1889–1976). For Heidegger, the human being, as *Dasein*, is a being that questions the meaning of its existence (1962). As such, hermeneutics is, again, not merely the understanding of written texts, but rather the understanding of the human condition itself. Heideggerian concepts of the 'world', the meaningful, rather than merely physical, environment within which human live, and as such the cultural horizon and source of Gadamerian pre-judgements, has been influential in the philosophy of sport, not least in terms of the possibility that sport is a source of new worlds (see Gebauer 1994). That is to say that the activities that sport sets free challenge existing conceptions of the human condition, its limitations and possibilities, and thus offer new interpretations of what it is to be human.

A final point may be made about the history and nature of hermeneutics, and here Ricoeur is again a guide. For Ricoeur, the hermeneutician may reasonably be suspicious about the meanings they encounter, and not merely as misinterpretations. Rather, meanings may be systematically and structurally misleading. He cites Marx, Nietzsche and Freud as 'masters of suspicion'. Marx's analysis of ideology and false consciousness, Nietzsche's of slave morality, and Freud's of neurosis, all suggest that, beneath the seemingly unproblematic and even self-evident meanings that we attribute to the world, to our actions and our moralities, there may lie power structures and conflicts that distort our understanding. Freud's psychoanalytic patients, for example, find their interpretation of their physical condition inhibited and distorted by the repression of traumatic memories. For Marx, the interpretation that ordinary people have of the social, economical and political world is one that is biased in favour of legitimating the privileges and power of the ruling class. It may be remarked that Nietzsche's work is becoming increasingly important within the philosophy of sport, and not least within this volume, suggesting that the role of a hermeneutics of sport is not merely to interpret sport, but to engage critically with the accounts that sport offers of the human condition, recognising that the worlds and traditions that make sport possible are themselves scarred by political conflict and

prejudices of the worst sort, and that these scars will be visible in sport itself.

Thus, Yunus Tuncel's 'Nietzsche, Sport and Contemporary Culture' opens the volume with a paper on Nietzsche and sport. Tuncel not only explores the connections between Nietzsche, hermeneutics, and sport, but he also provides an introduction to the key concepts in hermeneutics. Nietzsche's approach is presented as a useful hermeneutic tool to shed light on several aspects of sport like its festive and spectacular nature, justice in sport, body and bodily regime in sport, and the question of *Bildung*. Being penetrated by agonistic impulses that locate playfulness and game-playing as a factic element of both life and sport is what turns Nietzsche's philosophy into such a useful tool. Sport and life are projections of such creative and vital impulses. Agonistic impulses play such a relevant role that Tuncel argues that life itself must be taken as a game. Holding playfulness, creativity, and game-playing as the main impulses that must animate our attitude towards life has tremendous consequences for our modern view of life and sport. According to Tuncel's Nietzschean proposal, both life and sport should not be focused on instrumental reasoning and scarcity, but on abundance and creativity, leading to the Nietzschean overhuman.

Irena Parry and Jim Parry's 'Heideggerian Hermeneutics and its Application to Sport' analyzes Heidegger's view of interpretation and explore how it might affect our understandings of sport. For Heidegger, interpretation does not occur in the void, but on the basis of some features that are "always already" in play. One such feature is *Dasein*, that is to say, the being whose primary activity is to question himself about Being. Interpretation is thus not an intellectual function aimed at grasping some external object, but something connected to the ontology of human beings. Understanding is essentially practical. The practical character of interpretation goes in line with the situation in which athletes find themselves when practicing sports. In the exercise of understanding their immediate, practical situation, athletes not only solve a "technical" problem by relying on their knowledge of the game and skill, but they also understand themselves through sport.

Also drawing on Heidegger, Francisco Javier Lopez Frias and Xavier Gimeno Monfort's article, 'The Hermeneutics of Sport: limits and conditions of possibility of our understanding of sport', contrasts hermeneutics of sport with linguistic-analytic philosophy. Two views of philosophy are compared: ontology and description. Sports hermeneutics' task has to do with description. Hermeneutical accounts of sport attempt to describe the facticity of sport, which, according to the authors, is formed by three moments: embodiment, capabilities, and tradition. These three factic components of sport are intrinsically intertwined forming a unitary network of meaning. The task of sports

hermeneutics is to describe the different relationships that compose such a network of meaning.

In 'Play, Effort and Sport', Roger Savage draws on Gadamer's and Ricoeur's hermeneutic approaches to expose the main features of sport, namely, the contest and embodiment. For Savage, the contest is the *conditio per quam* of the sporting event. By engaging in a sports contest, players put aside their daily life obligations and demands to submit themselves to the agonistic logic of the game. The game becomes a site for exploring freedom by unleashing the body's powers. By overcoming the obstacles posed by the contest, the participants experience the limits and potential of their corporeality. This turns sport into a microcosm of the human condition. In real-life situations, human beings are constrained by conditions, contingencies, and exigencies that lie beyond their control and pose challenges that need to be faced and overcome. Savage concludes his chapter by emphasizing the parallels between life and sport and argues that participation in sports activities reaffirm an existence that was not chosen and opens the way to human freedom.

Andrew Edgar's 'Three Ways of Watching a Sports Video' is aimed at exploring the connection between sport and the human condition through the analysis of how to watch sports matches. This suggests that sport is not merely a superficial entertainment, but something with a deeper meaning similar to that attributed to the art work. To explore the connections between life, sport, and artworks, Edgar draws on Edward T. Cone's view about how to read an art work. According to Cone, our engagement with a work of art proceeds through three stages: (a) an initial pure experience of the work; (b) analysis; and (c) an intelligent and informed appreciation. Sports matches are revisited for diverse reasons. Edgar, however, places emphasis on the second and third steps, for he regards them as key to a full appreciation of the sports match that, at the same time, can lead us to a better understand of some elements of our human condition. Analytic knowledge is fundamental to the appreciation of sports – an awareness of the structure, logic and strategy of a game. Without the ability to provide an analytic reading, the sports match can only be experienced as entertainment. Once the analytic reading is provided, we can move on to the third step, where, by stepping outside the immediacy of the game, watching sport reveals something complex about the human condition, and the human capacity to deal with problems and obstacles. According to Edgar, sport may still not be art, but at its best, it has the potential to convey and reveal some deep truths about human nature.

With the attempt to explore further the connection between real-life situations and sports, Jesus Conill's 'Ratiovitalistic Hermeneutics and Sport in the Perspective of Jose Ortega y Gasset' analyses the ratiovitalistic proposal of one of the best-known Spanish

philosophers, Jose Ortega y Gasset. As Conill argues, sport plays a key role in Ortega's philosophy, for the attitude of the sportsperson exemplifies the best possible attitude towards life, namely, the sportive attitude. Conill opposes such an attitude to the one based on the instrumental use of the medium to satisfy our needs and desires, which he calls 'business sensitivity.' For Conill, life should not be based on measuring utility but about something else. In an analysis that reminds us of Suits's view of a life most worth living, Conill opposes work to sport and argues for a leisurely and creative attitude towards life.

In a similar vein, Ron Welters's 'On Aescetic Practices and Hermeneutic Circles' explores the different attitudes towards life and argues that sport can teach us a valuable lesson about how to change our lives for better. According to Welters, sport has strong ties with our everyday lives. Our sporting experience can teach us valuable lessons about how to live our lives. Welters explores the existential side of sport through an analysis of Peter Sloterdijk's ideas on philosophy and cycling. In doing so, he places particular emphasis on the way athletes experience their engagement in sport. Sport embodies the ascetic attitude required to complete the Sisyphean task of living our lives. In opposition to the "lusory" elements highlighted by analytic interpretations of sport inspired by Suits, Welters highlights the ascetic elements of sport, that is to say, those that turn sport into a practice where humans strive for excellence through dedicated training practices. Welters traces back the ascetic attitude towards sport to Coubertin, muscular Christianity, and more recent awareness of ecological and 'active' lifestyles, and thus locates the human search for transcending limitations at the core of sports. Endurance sports like cycling embody the proper attitude to engaging in sport. Cyclists fight with and against themselves and share a sense of coexistence ecosophical agony with the world.

In 'On the Aesthetic Potential of Sports and Physical Education', Luisa Avila da Costa and Teresa Lacerda analyze the aesthetic value of sport to education. To grasp the intrinsic aesthetic and pedagogical values of sport, they use a novel method based on the hermeneutic interpretation of interviews of sports practitioners. Hermeneutics is used to grasp the intrinsic aesthetic elements of sport by interpreting how sports practitioners experience them based on how they live, play, enjoy life, and learn. This aesthetic approach also provides a better understanding of ourselves, our sensibility, our deepest expectations, and ideals. The authors hold an internalist view of sports aesthetics that assumes that each sport has its internal spirit, with aims and purposes that shape its aesthetic expression. Such a spirit depends on the variety, complexity, and range of movements included within the sport. These possibilities relate to our vulnerable and finite

human condition. The connection between sport's aesthetic values and our human condition turns sports activities into valuable educational tools that tie with what makes us human. Sport is a site for self-expression through emotions with the fineness, elegance, agility and flow of a sports activity. With the development of an aesthetic sensitivity in sport we are contributing, not only to a better understanding of its most intimate and essential aspects but also to a better understanding of ourselves and our affective relationship with the world. If sport's reality is so many times referred to as an image of the values of each society, then it can also be proposed that the way we interpret, live and teach sports promotes specific ways of living and attitudes towards the world, and crucially an aesthetic attitude with such significant implications for our way of being in the world.

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